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The rather long short story or short novel, A Cold
Summer Heat, has been written as a requirement for my
masters thesis. Any conclusions, philosophic or otherwise,
should be arrived at through the interaction of the work and
the reader.

A COLD SUMMER HEAT

by

William A. Byrtus

A Thesis Submitted to
the Faculty of the Graduate School at
The University of North Carolina at Greensboro
in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Fine Arts

Greensboro
1971

Approved by

Fred Chappell
Thesis Adviser

APPROVAL PAGE

This thesis has been approved by the following
committee of the Faculty of the Graduate School at The
University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

I wish to thank Fred Chappell, my thesis director,
for his help and encouragement.

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Date of Examination

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WALLS

ELIZABETH PEARCE

Elizabeth Pearce walked briskly up the concrete walk toward her side of the red brick duplex. Her lab coat, draped over her thin, white arm, swayed gently in the warm breeze. Opening her purse, she rummaged through credit card slips, loose change, and cosmetics for the house key, reminding herself to put it on a chain with the ones for the car. She draped her coat over the porch's wrought iron handrail. Though she didn't know why, after unlocking the door, she turned back and sat on the top step, perhaps because it was early Spring. She watched a dog sniffing along the white picket fence of the house across the street. Throwing her head backward, she breathed deeply of the afternoon air, knowing that soon the evening air would smell of barbecue smoke from grills.

She watched Mrs. Hansen, a housewife who lived on the corner next to the vacant lot, as she hurried down the back steps, a basket of wet clothes propped against her wide hip, a plastic bag filled with clothes pins clutched tightly between her teeth. The Hansens lived in the only house on the street that was not a rented duplex. They had four children whose ages ranged from four to thirteen. Yes, and in a few minutes the older ones will be making their way noisily up

the street, thought Elizabeth. She looked at their yard that was cluttered with toys and had only a few patches of grass along the fence. Their arrival will be the end of a quiet afternoon and the beginning of a loud evening. She sighed and leaned farther backward, propping herself on her elbows. Squinting her eyes, she watched the clouds as they formed pictures. A dog chased a cat that changed into a baby crawling after a kite with a long tail. They all merged into a muscular young man with rather long arms that were spread and reaching toward her. Aware of the pain in her elbows, she sat up and ran her slender fingers through her long brown hair. A large shadow passed quietly over the duplexes across the street. From a few, the garbled voices of the afternoon soap operas drifted toward her. She stood when she heard Mrs. Hansen's door slam. She remembered her own laundry and that if she didn't do it soon, she wouldn't have a blouse to wear to work. Setting her purse and lab coat on the dining room table, she returned for the mail: a light bill, bank statement, and a catalogue. She sat in the chair in front of the window next to the console, her feet propped on a hassock. She had left the front door open, enjoying the Spring breeze filtering through the screen to gently caress her legs. She stood and quickly closed the door when she heard a motor bike turning on to the gravel street.

JOE AND MARY LAUREL

Mary Laurel, her fingers locked around her husband's waist, hoped they wouldn't slide sideways on the loose gravel. Her pregnant belly pushed tightly against Joe's firm back. She moaned and wished they would hurry and get home. She had liked the bike when they were dating and just after they were married. But now, it cramped her legs and would awaken the baby within her who had already begun turning and kicking.

"Don't hold on so tight," Joe shouted over the drone of the bike.

Leaning to the right, Joe watched the bike's front wheel cut smoothly through the gravel. He had a sudden impulse to violently squeeze the handbrake, instead he braked gently and stopped near Elizabeth's Falcon that was parked in front of the duplex.

"You may as well get off," he said. "And I'll take her up the hill."

He had heard Elizabeth's door slam and decided to make it worth her while by needlessly gunning the motor before climbing the grassy knoll in front of the apartment.

Mary took off her sweater as she walked slowly toward the duplex's front door. She didn't look in the mailbox, instead, she opened the screen and leaned against the wrought iron handrail to wait for Joe.

Mary, in the bedroom, was lying across the double bed, her uniform unbuttoned, her bra unsnapped. Her legs, breasts,

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Mary, in the bedroom, was lying across the double bed, her uniform unbuttoned, her bra unsnapped. Her legs, breasts,

and stomach all seemed to be aching at the same time. Each radiating different intensities of pain. When she closed her eyes trying to forget, she saw Joe running toward her, his muscular legs digging out tufts of grass, his long but full face smiling; his hair mussed from the helmet fell across his forboding black eyes. At the end of one of his outstretched arms is the house key; the other, stretched behind him, clutches his motorcycle helmet.

Joe propped his feet upon the couch's threadbare and overstuffed arm. He pried off his shoes and began going through the day's mail.

"Hey, there's a letter from your mom," he shouted. "And it's not marked 'Personal Mrs. Mary Laurel'."

THROUGH THE PARTITION

Elizabeth, after slamming the door on the approaching motorbike, went to the console where she searched through a stack of records until she found her favorite Benny Goodman album. Prying her shoes off, she again propped her feet on the hassock and wiggled her toes then reached down and massaged them, allowing the music to soothe her mind and drive away the lingering cries of children who had come into the clinic that day.

She had watched the young couple the day they moved into the other side of the duplex. Since then, she had little to do with them and resented their rather noisy behavior. At times, she had almost phoned to ask them to turn down the music or to please not yell so loud when they argued, which they did frequently.

. . .

"Hey, we got any beer left?" Joe shouted.

Mary, continuing to lay with her eyes closed, became fascinated with the bizzare patterns of red, yellow, and green light unfolding before her.

"Hey, we got any beer left?" Joe again shouted, this time cupping his hands around his mouth.

"It's in the refrigerator," she called back. "Unless you drank it all."

She stared at the cracks in the light blue paint covering the bedroom ceiling. Lowering her gaze, she watched a roach feeling its way across the dresser toward a box of bath powder.

"Ya, well get me one."

Sorting through the pile of magazines and newspapers on the coffee table in front of him, Joe picked up an old issue of "Panther", skimmed the advertisements for rubber products and nude films, looked briefly at the fold-out then began reading a story. Parts of the story seemed familiar but he couldn't remember its ending: "Continued on page 78".

"Hey, what's for supper?" he called, flipping the pages toward the back of the magazine.

"She stood in front of me, wearing this fantastic dress made out of some kind of see through material that clung like ..."

. . .

Elizabeth reversed the records on the console. In the kitchen, she set out a T.V. dinner and mixed herself a gin and tonic. She returned to the gold velvet covered chair beside the living room window. She slipped off her hose, their crumpled brownness became a thick pile on the blue carpet beside the leather hassock. Unbuttoning her white work blouse, she again remembered the stack of dirty clothes that would mildew unless she took them to the laundry. She hated laundromats and the people who frequented them who sat staring

blankly at the clothes tumbling in the dryers and the children that ran up and down the aisles shouting for cokes and money for the bubble gum machines.

She stood and curled her toes into the thick carpet and moved unthinkingly toward the bathroom. Staring at the initialed towels hanging from the rack, she decided it was too cool for a hot bath and not hot enough for a cool shower.

. . .

"Hey, where's that beer? Joe shouted. "Is it going to take all day?"

Mary sat on the edge of the bed. This weight, this damned pushing weight, she thought. She finished taking off her uniform and brassiere and felt embarrassed about taking off the tight undies that cut into her swollen belly. Instead, she pushed them down and inspected the deep welt across what had been her naval.

. . .

Elizabeth mixed herself another drink, at the same time, she reminded herself to buy more gin and mix.

. . .

"You won't even give me time to change clothes," Mary shouted from the bedroom. "Will you, huh?"

She stood in the doorway between the kitchen and living room, looking at Joe who seemed dignified and haughty as he read the magazine. Her blue satin robe felt scratchy against her tender nipples.

"You just couldn't wait," she said. "Could you?"

Joe opened the magazine to the fold-out, looked at it, then at her, as she sat down heavily in the large chair near the coffee table.

"I've got to get this garter off," she said. "It's cutting into my legs."

"So, big deal. Take it off."

She propped her feet on the coffee table and ran her hands along her ankles whose veins were standing out in thick blue knots.

He again thumbed through the magazine, this time concentrating on the advertisements, hoping to find a misplaced censor line so that he might have a glimpse of something real. It's a game like a carnival. They almost, but never do, he thought.

"Sometimes, Joe Laurel, I don't know why I married you."

He held the fold-out above his head and pointed it toward her.

"The feeling is mutual."

He dropped the magazine, stood and walked slowly to her. She bit her lower lip and rubbed her eyes.

"It isn't my fault I look so bad," she said. "If we had some money I could buy maternity clothes and cosmetics."

As he reached for his beer, his hand brushed her swollen robe.

"Oh, well, I don't think it makes a hell of a lot of difference in your condition. Right?"

"Yes, but it does, it really does," she sobbed.

. . .

Elizabeth placed the T.V. dinner in the oven and set the timer. At the kitchen table, she began going over her bank statement: Handi-Pick 2.18, Betty's Beauty Salon 3.12, Duke's Texaco 5.47, A & P Grocery 2.17--.

. . .

Mary banged the doors of the kitchen cabinets as she searched for the bottle of aspirin.

"No. It's not right. Other women look their prettiest when they're pregnant," she shouted. "I look ugly."

. . .

They're about to start again, thought Elizabeth. She carried her drink into the living room where she turned up the volume on the console.

. . .

Joe pretended not to hear and looked out the window at the clothes fluttering on Mrs. Hansen's line. Mary held her hands under cold water and hoped the swelling would go down so she could again put on her rings.

"You've been pregnant before?" he shouted. "I'll bet it was when you were a senior in high school."

He finished his beer and remembered that he hadn't had anything to eat for breakfast and for lunch, he had only

some crackers and chocolate milk that he had been able to steal off one of the wards at the hospital.

He looked at Mary who continued holding her hands under the cold water. He set his beer on top of the letter from her mother. After a long swallow, he began reading the letter:

"Dear Mary, It is very hot here today. Daddy is busy in the shop. My back has been hurting but I really don't think it is bad enough to go to Dr. Stillwell about. Here is the clipping from Nancy Hope's wedding. I hope you are feeling better and wish, for you, that you could quit working."

He skipped over the next few lines remembering that she had written a letter a week since they had been married and how they were all about the same until the last paragraph when she dropped her personal bomb:

"You remember Max Butler, don't you? Well, he is home from the army and has gone into the paint business with his father. He seems to be doing very well and has bought a new car. Max still drops by and asks about you when he visits with daddy and me, which is at least once a week."

Joe crumpled the letter and threw it at the garbage can.

"Who was the father?" he asked. "Max, Mike or Harry?"

Mary turned violently from the sink, a coffee cup poised and aimed at his head.

"You're the meanest person in the world," she screamed running down the hall toward the bathroom. "I hate you. I hate you."

The bathroom door slammed and the kitchen became a silent loneliness except for an occasional high pitched note that filtered through the partition from the apartment next door.

"I was only joking," he shouted.

When there was no answer, he opened a fresh beer and returned to the couch where he again looked through the magazine. He couldn't find anything he had not read at least once. Throwing the magazine against the couch, he began pacing across the room, making about faces at the front door and the living room doorway.

"Hey, what's for supper?" he called. "You gonna cook tonight or not?"

Again there was no response. He slammed the front door when he went out. His first impulse was to get on the bike and ride it as fast as possible along the gravel street. He decided he had better save the gas for getting to work and back.

Mary, unable to stop crying, washed her face several times with cold water, grinding the washcloth against her cheeks, chin, and forehead.

Sitting on the top step of the porch, Joe watched the paper boy slowly make his way up the street. Two houses down, Sue Ellen Feilds emerged to retrieve the paper. She tucked it under her arm, turned, saw Joe on the porch, and waved. He answered by toasting her with his beer.

Joe carried the paper inside, Sue Ellen's wave lingering pleasantly in his mind. He skipped section A and turned to the back of section B where he decoded his horoscope:

"Your--thoughts are--all--on distant places."

Ya, but Sue Ellen's husband is a cop, he thought. And he remembered the afternoon he and her husband, Bob, had drunk beer together. Bob told him about his moonlighting as a truck driver, tile layer and private guard. He kept repeating how he and Sue Ellen "Weren't nothing but plain folk".

"Hey, Mary," he called. "You okay?"

When she didn't answer, he decided to check on her. He tossed his empty beer can into the overflowing garbage can.

He stood in front of the bathroom door. Even this needs painting, he thought, and wanted to drive his fist through the door's ugly thin wood.

"We gonna eat tonight or not?"

The only answer was the noisy sound of water running.

"Why don't you take your bath after supper?"

The water stopped. The door opened slowly. He felt pity, then checked himself, sighed, and leaned against the wall. Her face was covered with red splotches, her eyes were puffed. She sobbed then stopped herself by taking a deep breath. For a moment, he wanted to take her into his arms and hold her tight, the way one might a frightened animal.

"Well?" he said.

"I really wanted to lay down for awhile," her voice quivered. "My leg has been hurting me really bad."

"Since the day you found out you were pregnant that's all I've heard," he shouted at her back. "Your legs, head, back, cramps. Something all the time."

He sat at the kitchen table, in front of him, the evening paper leaned against the empty wine bottle with a plastic rose jutting from its neck. The rose stared at him as he listened to the neighbor's children playing cowboys and Indians. The lightness from the first beers became depression. He rested his head on his folded arms and closed his eyes. An image of himself in uniform in one of the countless bars along the strip appeared before him - alone, at the end of the bar, holding a half empty glass of beer. The barmaid, a plump woman with platinum blonde hair, exaggerated eyes and pencilled eyebrows was wiping down the bar, her heavy breasts and arms swaying thickly with each stroke. She smiles at him, her teeth uneven and cigarette stained. He wants to burst out how lonely he is. She hands him another beer. The rings on her pudgy fingers sparkle.

"Lonely?" The written voice of a character in the story he had read earlier.

He takes the beer, stands, and swaggers to the jukebox where he plays a quarter's worth and slips into the back booth. His heart quickens at the thought of the barmaid sliding

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in beside him, her leg brushing his, her hand...

"I'll start supper. I said, I'll start supper."

He looked up. Mary, standing beside the refrigerator, had taken out a package of hamburger. Her hair was combed and she was wearing fresh lipstick, make-up, and her new pair of bedroom slippers, the ones she had been saving for when she went to the hospital.

"Will you empty the garbage?" she asked.

She tossed the empty hamburger package at the overflowing bag. It bounced off and lay on the cracked linoleum floor. Her face twisted painfully as she stooped to pick up the package.

"Please," she said.

He finished his beer and bent the can.

"Sure."

. . .

Elizabeth, having changed into her after work - work clothes, carried a T.V. tray into the living room. She was quite high and the rug tickled the arches of her feet. She suppressed a giggle and laughed out loud when she had difficulty setting up the tray. She switched off the console and switched on the television set. Almost news time. Oh, to hell with the laundry, she thought. The buzzer on the stove cut into the pre-news advertisements.

. . .

Joe, lying across the couch, closed his eyes and hoped the dream would return. It didn't. The living room's soiled tan walls hung before him.

. . .

Elizabeth ate very little of her roast beef with gravy, mashed potatoes, and green beans. The news, which never seemed to vary, depressed her. The serious drone of the commentator followed her to the back porch where she set the leftover T.V. dinner on the top step for the neighborhood cats.

Searching through the kitchen cabinets, she found what was left of the fifth of gin. She mixed it with what was left of the can of grapefruit juice.

She sat on the top step of the front porch, her drink in one hand, the newspaper in the other. The mercury street lamps flickered then stayed. Their sheets of light cut across telephone poles and television antennas. She watched two lightning bugs, their backs flashing yellow, land in the grass beside the neighbor's motorbike. She felt calm though no longer depressed and prided herself on not feeling lonely the way she usually did. She stretched her legs until the backs of her heels rested against the edge of the bottom step. The young couple next door seem unusually quiet, she thought.

ROOMS

MARY LAUREL AND ELIZABETH PEARCE

Mary Laurel, wearing a pea soup green scrub dress that hung loosely from her shoulders but clung tightly to her pregnant belly, slumped forward in the large chair next to the coffee table. The foetus inside her, perhaps because of the long walk home, began kicking violently. At times, like now, she wished it would die. At first, she had hated the pain it caused, not the baby.

. . .

Elizabeth Pearce draped her thin lavender robe over the bathroom clothes hamper. She tested the water's temperature with her foot and sipped gin and tonic while waiting for the tub to fill.

. . .

Mary bent forward and pressed her hands tightly against her belly. She glared at the framed print of praying hands that hung from the wall opposite her, half aware of the afternoon's shadows as they crept through the room, and unaware of the noisy children playing in the street. Her blood splattered nylons formed a veil over her cracked white nurse's shoes. She leaned backward and propped her feet upon the coffee table. Its sharp edge cut painfully into her swollen ankles and she decided to move to the couch whose overstuffed arm might make a good leg rest.

. . .

The room's heat, the perfumed bath, and her drink, gave Elizabeth lightness and tranquility. She washed herself with slow gentle strokes, appreciating the washcloth's almost rough strength.

. . .

Though the couch was more comfortable, Mary still couldn't relax and felt embarrassed whenever she thought of the day's events. She had been scheduled to scrub in on a Wertheim, an all day case. But had not been able to finish it, and was forced to ask for someone to relieve her. It had been the standing in one spot for so long that had caused her to almost faint over the Mayo stand.

After being relieved by a student, she went upstairs to the lounge, where she ate lemon cookies and drank several glasses of water. The cookies left an oily film on the roof of her mouth. She couldn't find milk, pop, or anything to replace the oil, and felt generally uncomfortable as she started back toward the main operating room. The supervisor met her on the stairs and asked, "What's the matter? Why do you look so bad lately?"

When she didn't answer the supervisor told her to return to room #7 and to make sure the student kept up with the case.

. . .

Elizabeth stepped on to the lavender fluff rug beside the tub. Drying herself, she bent forward and studied the barely discernable stretch marks from the only time she had been pregnant. She reached for her glass of gin and tonic, took three long swallows, and began wiping the fog from the full length mirror.

. . .

After having supplied the student with those items needed to finish the case, Mary retired to a far corner, next to the sterile supply cabinet. She listened to the chief resident's chanting voice as he explained the anatomy and the procedure to the intern. It was the same voice he used when asking for instruments. She laid her head on her folded arms and fell asleep to the rhythmic hiss of the anesthesia machine.

. . .

Her legs, she concluded, even though she was nearing forty, had remained long and supple. Still though, my thighs and waist are too straight - that's what makes my figure masculine. Elizabeth took another step toward the mirror. Her breasts, though not large, had retained their firmness. She studied the mole between them and the two large hairs growing from it. Once she had tried pulling the hairs out with a pair of tweezers. The pain had been too much. Holding a large towel in front of her, she hurried from the bathroom.

. . .

Mary changed from her scrub dress into her satin robe then returned to the overstuffed couch. She didn't know how long she had been dozing but did know that every time she fell asleep she had been awakened by the baby's kicking. Intuitively she realized it was about time for Joe to come home. Impulsively she wanted to pick-up the house and prepare a snack for him. She knew he would be quite hungry because he had left for work with only twenty cents in his pocket. At the same time, she was aware that; now, right now, was the first time in several weeks that she was not having any sort of pain. Anyway, there's really nothing to fix him, she thought.

. . .

Elizabeth tossed the bath towel over her night stand then stretched out across the double bed and pressed the pillow against her breasts, the way an imagined lover might fold himself into her softness. Sheets of light from the mercury lamps outside her window covered her back, buttocks and wide spread legs to her ankles.

First she dreamt she was at a party with her husband whose numerous medals hung loosely from his dress uniform. Several times, she had to push past other officers in order to get to the punch bowl. He smiled mechanically at her and saluted. Her dream switched to a large banquet where she was alone at a very large table staring at three candelabra that floated above mechanical heads that smiled and nodded at

plates of food floating past everyone. She reached for a single apple at the base of the first of the candelabra.

. . .

Mary opened her eyes. The room was dark except for the florescent praying hands. She turned on to her side, pressed her face against the arm of the couch and sobbed, "Why, oh why me."

Later, she went into the kitchen where she had a bowl of graham crackers and milk and re-read a letter from her mother. Underneath the sink she found an unopened Pepsi which she carried to the bedroom. She finished about half the bottle of pop before falling asleep.

. . .

JOE LAUREL AT WORK

At ten thirty, the hospital was quiet except for the occasional voice of the paging operator. In fact, thought Joe, it's unusually quiet for this time of year. He had only three patients on continuous ventilators: two post-operative open hearts in the recovery room and a drug overdose on the respiratory care unit. Both of the post-op hearts seemed stable and their blood gases were excellent. He monitored them quickly and left the recovery room.

The suicide attempt, a female in her late twenties, had taken large doses of: Seconal, Mellaril, and Doriden. Whether or not she survived would probably be determined by the amount of Doriden she had ingested. He had seen several successful attempts because of that particular drug. This one, even though she had been to hemodialysis every day since her arrival, continued to regress.

"Have they drawn any blood gases lately?" he asked the private duty nurse, a young black who at the moment, was reading over the intake and output chart at the foot of the bed.

"The intern was in at ten and drew some," she smiled at him. "I'll go see if they are on the chart yet."

He watched her walk away, her firm buttocks swinging sensually beneath the tight fitting pants suit. Earlier, he had noticed her large breasts and had wondered if they were as dark as her face or if they were lighter where her bra ended.

He removed the protective covering from the respirator, a Bennett MA-1, and studied the lights above the control panel.

While waiting for the nurse to return, he emptied the water trap, refilled the nebulizer and checked the tubing leading from the machine to the patient for leaks. He watched the controlled rise and fall of her chest and again wondered how someone like her; who seemingly had everything, wealth, beauty and a family would want to commit suicide. He checked her pupils, neither responded to light and both remained dilated.

"Here are her blood gases," the nurse said. "Do you want me to read them?"

"Please."

"Her pH is 7.53, PO_2 240 and the PCO_2 is 25," she said.

He again looked at the control panel, decreased the tidal volume from one liter to seven hundred cc's and decreased the percent of oxygen from sixty to forty percent.

"There, that ought to bring her gases within a more normal range," he said.

"Do you really think it will help any?" the nurse uncovered one of the patient's legs.

He replaced the protective cover over the control panel of the respirator.

"I don't know. Does she show any signs of responding?"

"No, not even when I suction out her endotracheal tube." She leaned over him to adjust the I.V.'s microdrip. Her breasts pressed against his back.

He tried to take his mind off what he was feeling and concentrated on the patient who more than ever seemed a suspended state of death.

"At least she did a good job of it," the nurse said. "Most of them just want sympathy. And I can't feel any sorrow for them."

She began rubbing lotion into the bottom of the patient's uncovered foot, her dark hands angrily kneading the toes.

Joe turned to leave then again looked at the nurse.

"I read somewhere once that everyone has thought about suicide at one time or another. Have you?"

"Honey life's just too good for me to think about that," her thick laugh followed him into the hall.

The outside was hot and sticky and pressed against him as he rode toward the duplex. Speeding up did not help. He passed a drive-in on the way, wanted to stop and have a beer but remembered he didn't have enough money even for a pack of cigarettes.

. . .

HOME AGAIN HOME

Before parking the bike on the lawn, he revelled the motor, hoping to alert his wife. The front porch light shone on the mailbox. She hasn't even taken in the mail, he thought, as he stuffed the advertisement and two envelopes into his helmet. He slammed the door loudly behind himself and walked quickly to the kitchen.

He emptied the mail from his helmet on to the kitchen table and hurried toward the bedroom where he switched on the light. Mary, curled into a ball, lay in the center of the rumpled and clothes strewn bed. In fact, it looks worse than when I left, he thought. Her brassiere was on the floor, underpants above the bed, uniforms scattered on top of the dresser, magazines and parts of newspapers littered the floor. He threw his helmet at the top of the hollywood bed, barely missing a half empty bottle of Pepsi.

"Christ almighty," he shouted. "Just look at this place. Look at all the damned dirty clothes."

Mary sat up quickly, stared and blinked her eyes as though she was trying to awaken from a dream.

He rushed around the room picking up clothes and kicking at the papers and magazines.

"What the hell have you been doing since you got off work?" he shouted. "Huh, what?"

She hurried past him and stopped at the doorway.

"Well, if you would go to the laundromat once in awhile," she said. "We wouldn't have such a mess."

Joe spun around to face her, the veins on his neck bulged, his face reddened.

"You're a pig. A damned slob."

He dropped everything except her underpants.

"You won't even put your rust stained undies out of sight," he shouted. "Will you, huh? You have to leave them on top of my pillow."

When he threw them at her, they bounced off her robe and landed at her feet.

"Hide them, bury them, do something with the fucking things."

Her left hand pulled frantically at the top of her robe, she took a quick step toward him and stopped clutching both her hands at her sides.

"And you are so god awful perfect. I have to pick up after you all over the house," she said. "You throw your crap everywhere, not just in the bedroom."

She was sorry she had said anything. She turned back toward the bathroom. Subconsciously, she waited to hear him run toward her and begin slapping her around. He had before. She felt shaky inside and wanted to vomit. She turned back. He was cleaning off the top of the hollywood bed.

"Furthermore, your feet stink," she shouted.

The half full bottle of pop crashed into the wall behind her, barely missing her head, its contents forming brown splotches on the blue robe.

"Ya, well your breath is bad," he ran toward her. "It smells worse than the animal pit at the city dump."

As his words crashed against her face, his hands pinned her arms against the wall. She burst into tears.

. . .

When Elizabeth heard the bottle crash against the wall, she thought it was just another part of the weird dream she had been having. She awakened and stared out the window at the mercury lamp. She wondered what time it was. She remembered her hunger. The muted argument of the young couple followed her to the kitchen.

. . .

"You don't love me, you never have," Mary's voice rose to a whine. "Or else you wouldn't talk this way, you know you wouldn't."

He released her and fell against the opposite wall. His hands trembled and he felt guilty about wanting to crush her wrists, wanting to crush her.

"Ya, well, you ought to be able to take what you put out," he said softly.

As she shuffled past him she lowered her head and stared at the cracks in the paint peeled floor.

"What you said isn't true," he said. "You know it isn't."

She hurried into the bathroom and pulled a long strand of toilet paper from the holder, then began blowing her nose.

"You don't love me," she said between bursts. "You never have loved me."

He went to the bathroom's doorway, started in and stopped. He watched her as she bent forward to turn on the faucets to fill the tub. The swirling water reminded him of the tightness within himself.

"No, no, I don't love you," he said. "I'm just staying on here because the food is so good."

"Do you love me, really?"

He sat on the toilet staring at the tile beneath those tiles that had broken off. A spider looked at him then scurried across the floor toward the bath tub. His first impulse was to step on it and feel its thick middle pop beneath the sole of his shoe. He stopped himself when he remembered reading somewhere that spiders ate insects.

"I guess I love you," he said. "But I like to have things my way. You know what I mean, hun?" He watched the spider disappear beneath the tub. It's probably hunting for roaches, he thought.

. . .

Using mayonnaise and bologna, Elizabeth made herself two sandwiches. She listened to the end of the argument then heard water running. She remembered her own bath and how good it had felt. After cleaning off the table and washing

her plate and glass, she went into the living room where she turned on the television set for the late news. She hoped the late movie would be a good one.

. . .

Mary scrubbed her belly vigorously. Joe watched and thought he would never know how something that once had been so flat could stretch so much.

"Want me to scrub your back?"

When she didn't answer, he took the washcloth and began gently rubbing it up and down along her back. He felt embarrassed about the way he had acted earlier.

"That feels so good," she said.

He looked at the smoothness of her back and the wet hair at the base of her neck. Dropping the wash rag, he slid his hand forward until he was holding one of her engorged breasts.

"Please, take your hand away," she pleaded. "They're sore."

. . .

They lay in bed, she on her side, facing the wall away from him. He pushed against her back, ran his hands over her breasts, and kissed the back of her neck.

"Stop Joe, you know we can't."

"Yes, we can. And it will be good. Anyway, the doctor said..."

"No, I said. You know how it makes my leg hurt afterward." She pushed his hands away and moved closer to the wall.

"Please."

"No, no, I don't want to. I have to be up early so I can go to work," she whined. "Remember?"

"Ya, okay."

He rolled on to his back, folded his hands behind his head and stared at cracks in the ceiling. She lay quietly for a long time, then, when she spoke, it was soft:

"It would be different if I didn't have to work. I mean, if I could stay home and rest and make the house nice," she said. "Like other women."

He slammed his fist into the wall.

"Okay, okay, I'm sorry I'm not rich or that my folks don't have a damn thing. That I don't have a better job. That I got you pregnant. That I was brought up a good Catholic. For everything. Everything," he calmed himself. "Let's just forget it, okay?"

Mary soon was sleeping. He listened to her rhythmic breathing and snoring. When he could no longer tolerate the presence of the bed against his restless back, he got up and went to the kitchen where he lighted a cigarette using one of the stove's burners. He sat at the kitchen table staring at the plastic flower jutting from the top of the wine bottle. He thought of writing a letter to his parents

or one of his old high school buddies. Decided that by the time he found pencil and paper, it would not be worth the effort. He looked through the pile of bills in front of his place at the table: rent, furniture, loan company, clinic, electricity, phone, and he stopped, realizing that it didn't matter, that even with both of them working there was no way to keep up or to pay them. Suddenly, he wanted to cry but couldn't and went into the living room where he found the afternoon paper.

He saw only a few advertisements for part-time help. He had tried that once before. He had lasted only a week, in a filling station at one of the newer shopping centers. Whenever he went to work, the boss, an old man with a thin and very wrinkled face, used to laugh and point to the garage where several flat tires awaited changing. Repairing the flat tires had been easy compared to trying to scrub the grime from his hands before going to work at the hospital each morning. Finally, when his hands began to crack and bleed, he told the old man he wouldn't be back.

. . . .

Elizabeth, having awakened, found it difficult getting back to sleep. She propped her pillows against the bed board and turned on the reading lamp. She couldn't become absorbed in the story about a young girl and the frustrations of her "first love". She tossed the magazine on to the floor beside the bed.

In the kitchen, she poured herself a tall glass of gin and tonic. The drink plus the two sleeping pills made it easy and she soon fell into a deep slumber.

. . . .

SUNRISE AND A HOT SUMMER'S DAY

Joe was the first to hear the radio-alarm. He turned toward his wife who continued to breathe deeply in her sleep.

"Hey, you going to work today?"

When she didn't answer, he leaned forward and began shaking her shoulder. Her skin was oily and smooth. He pushed his lips against the side of her neck.

"It's time to get up, honey," he whispered against her ear.

"Huh, what?"

The radio played a popular tune, a rock number. Mary sat up in the bed. Her breasts and swollen belly looked very white in the morning light. He bent forward and kissed where her belly button had been. The foetus inside her kicked. She smelled musty but not unpleasant.

"Don't, please don't. I'm dirty and sweaty," she said.

He moved his hand downward.

"You smell human, and good, not like a bottle of perfume or bath powder or something artificial."

He began kissing along the inside of her thighs.

"Now stop!" She pulled quickly away from him.

"Want me to fix you some breakfast?" he asked.

"No, it would just make me sick." She sat on the edge of the bed rubbing the sleep from her eyes. He rolled on to his stomach and buried his face in the pillow.

A few minutes later he heard her vomiting in the bathroom. He listened, the way he had to her snoring the night before. Then he heard her running water, gargling, and brushing her teeth.

She swallowed her fluid pill and her vitamin pill and was able to force down a cup of beef bouillon before dressing for work.

"You going to take me to work or not?" she stood in the bedroom door, looking at Joe who she knew was only pretending to be asleep. "If we don't hurry, I'll be late."

. . .

When she awoke, Elizabeth still had the taste of gin in her mouth. Automatically, she went to the bathroom to brush her teeth and to gargle. Standing in front of the mirror, she examined the wrinkles beneath her eyes. Oh, damn, she thought, Dr. Meyers is going to give me hell about not taking care of myself. She remembered that it was her day off; stuck her tongue out at the mirror, and hurried back to bed.

. . .

She was waiting on the front porch, her blue sweater folded across her lap.

"It's about time," she said when he burst through the front door.

At first, the bike wouldn't turn over. He cursed it and the already very hot morning. When it finally did crank, he shouted angrily at Mary to hurry up and get on.

"Please don't go so fast. I'm afraid I might fall," she shouted over the bike's din.

"Hang on tighter."

"Let me off. If you are going to drive crazy, I'll walk and be late."

He stopped in front of the main entrance to the hospital. She hurried around to the front of the bike, her face flushing angrily as she leaned over the handle bars to kiss him impersonally on the cheek.

She started toward the double doors leading to the main lobby then turned back:

"Do you think you'll be able to get the laundry done today?"

"I don't know, ya, I guess so," he watched other persons hurrying past her toward the glass doors that reminded him of a mechanical monster's mouth that ate people.

She pulled open one of the doors and held it so others might hurry through. He wanted to shout at her not to go, to not allow herself to become possessed by the disease and suffering inside. She continued to hold the door open, as though she was waiting for him to say something else.

"Please, if nothing else," she shouted. "Get the garbage emptied." And disappeared into the hospital's bright lobby.

He turned up Elder Street toward Fisk where he stopped at a Quick Pick and bought a quart of wine, a paperback book,

and a package of Gouda cheese. He knew Mary would be angry at his having spent the money. Oh, well, he thought, if I do the laundry and buy something really special for supper she won't mind. No, better not buy anything. She'll want to go grocery shopping when she gets off work. Ya, but a nice steak, the candle, and a fresh green salad... He was suddenly aware of the early morning's intense heat. He thought of going to one of the discount houses and writing a bad check for a fan. He turned on to the gravel road leading toward the duplex.

Sue Ellen Fields waved as Joe passed. She and her children were standing around a large plastic swimming pool. She bent forward to test the water in the already half filled pool.

"It's going to be a hot one today," Joe answered her wave, slowed, then gunned the bike up the grassy knoll in front of her house. He stopped beside the pool. One of the smaller girls, maybe she was three or four, ran to the bike.

"Gimme a ride, gimme a ride," she pleaded. "Please."

"Afraid not, you might fall off and break your head," he looked at Sue Ellen who laughed.

"Here, you finish filling it," she handed the girl the hose. "Tell Mary to come on down and have some lemonade when she gets off work."

She walked to the playpen where the baby had begun to cry. She bent forward to look for the pacifier. When she did, her loose blouse opened and her ample breasts were exposed to Joe.

"Ya, I will," he said. "And oh, we'd like to have you and your husband up for supper sometime."

The baby was quiet. She started toward Joe then turned her attention to the girl who had, by this time, turned the hose upon herself.

"Now look what you've done," Sue Ellen shouted. "And that play suit was clean. Now hurry on in the house."

She looked at Joe who watched the girl turn and run quickly to the front door.

"I just don't know what I'm going to do with her," said Sue Ellen. She picked up the still sputtering hose and walked toward the side of the house, her wide buttocks swinging pleasantly beneath the thin material of her tight fitting shorts.

She turned back to Joe. "Tell Mary I have a box of baby clothes for her."

. . . .

It was the morning's heat that finally forced Elizabeth out of bed. After a cool bath and a bloody Mary, she felt prepared for her day off, if not industriously looking forward to it. She opened all the windows in the house then hurried from room to room picking up dirty clothes. She filled two baskets. One for the dry cleaners and the other for washing. She set them beside the front door, put on her scarf, and found her purse and set it on top of the first basket. She remembered that she had left the radio on in the kitchen.

. . .

The paper bag full of garbage already had a small tear in it. Joe picked it up gently and hoped it would hold together until he could get it into the corrugated can at the foot of the back stairs. He was almost there and had leaned over to remove the lid from the can when the bag burst. Cursing, he began picking up the scattered trash. He had a feeling that someone was watching, turned and saw Elizabeth, a green plastic bag clutched in her right hand, standing on her porch trying to keep from laughing. When he noticed her, she hurried inside, slamming the door as she went.

"Pretty damn funny," he shouted to her side of the duplex.

. . .

Elizabeth quickly finished cleaning the kitchen, locked the back door, then hurried through the house looking for any laundry or dry cleaning that she may have missed earlier.

. . .

He had placed the wine in the freezer compartment of the refrigerator immediately after arriving home. He sat on the front porch, his back pressed against the wrought iron hand-rail, tasted the wine which was cool but not yet chilled and left a bitter taste in his mouth. He thumbed through the morning paper then cut himself a wedge of cheese. He looked at the empty glass, decided to go back inside and change into his swimming trunks, that way, he might even be able to get a

little suntan; at any rate, he wouldn't sweat as much. On the way, he refilled his glass, sprinkled in a few drops of saccarin, and added some ice. He stuffed the pocket book, Thrill Grill by Dick Long, into the waistband of his swim trunks then returned to the front porch.

The brightness of the sun made it difficult to read. He closed the book then his eyes and leaned backward to allow the sun's warmth to pulsate against his bare chest. A vision of Sue Ellen leaning over the playpen drifted before him. Beads of sweat formed on his forehead and chest and began trickling down the front of his body. He enjoyed the feeling. The slam of a screen door suddenly alerted him.

Elizabeth, a basket of clothes propped against her hip, backed through the screen on to the porch. When she turned around, she saw Joe. He seemed asleep. She stared at the paperback beside his outstretched leg. She knew she must be blushing.

Joe stood then bent forward and picked up the glass of wine, drained it, then turned back toward Elizabeth's side of the duplex. She lowered her head and hurried toward the steps, the basket of clothes bouncing wildly.

"You need some help?" he reached for the basket's handle.

"Thank you," her voice sounded cold. "You can set them in the back seat."

He set the second basket beside the first. She smiled. It was the first time he had ever seen her smile. She's not bad, he thought, damn long legs. Her screen again slammed. He returned to his spot on the porch, looked past the empty house to Sue Ellen's. The pool was no longer in the front yard. Ya, but not as good as her, he thought. Anyway, Elizabeth's probably almost old enough to be my mother.

. . .

MEANWHILE

Mary glanced at her wristwatch. Oh, god, six more hours. The coldness of the room in which she was circulating nurse penetrated.

"I'll be back in a second," she said to the scrub nurse who was busy cutting suture for the next case. "I'm just going to get a gown to put on."

She pulled the gown tightly around herself then tied it and started back to the room. I wonder if Joe will get the laundry done or if he'll make some excuse like he always does or not do it because he says it makes him feel hen-pecked, she thought. She put on a fresh mask before re-entering the room.

"This is our last case," the scrub nurse said. "Go see how soon before anesthesia's ready to move the patient in."

"I think they're ready."

She helped move the patient into the room. Then, because things were going smoothly, she sat on the stool next to the supply cabinet. She felt warm and comfortable for the first time since she arrived that morning. The case, a routine vein stripping, was over quickly. Afterward, she and the scrub nurse worked together to clean and restock the room.

"You ought to slow down," the scrub nurse said. " 'Cause the sooner we're finished, the sooner we'll have to go somewhere else."

"Maybe so," Mary answered. "But the sooner I'm finished here, the sooner I can take a break."

The supervisor, a thick set read haired woman stopped Mary in the hall. "Finished already?" she said. "If you are, you can go relieve in room #8."

"If you don't mind," Mary answered, "I'd like to take my break first." She turned down the adjacent hall and walked quickly toward the large green door that led to the lounge.

. . .

AND

Joe refilled his wine glass. Again he added ice and saccharin. He felt quite high and tried not to think about Sue Ellen but ended trying to think of an excuse to visit her. Again he read from the pocket book he had bought earlier: "I could tell that she didn't have on a brassiere, not that she really needed one, with a pair like that. Then I let my eyes drift downward..."

The cold shower felt good but did little to sober him. In fact, it made him more aware of the intensity of the day's heat. He remembered the clothes that he had promised to wash and decided it was too hot to go to an even hotter laundromat. He could no longer tolerate the still heat of the bedroom and hoped he might find a breeze in the back yard.

He spread the blanket beneath an Elm tree in the back yard. Again he tried reading from the book but the glare of the sun prevented it. He returned to the house for: sunglasses, suntan lotion, and to refill his wine glass. He heard them before he pushed through the door on to the porch.

Even though the empty apartment separated them, he still had a good view of Sue Ellen and her children as they played in the swimming pool. He focused on Sue Ellen who seemed to be trying to teach the baby how to swim. He continued watching after again making himself comfortable on the blanket. The tight green bathing suit seemed barely able to contain her fullness. Several times the shoulder straps fell

from the suit's top. Finally, she ignored them and allowed her breasts to swing freely as she swooped down to push the child along the edge of the pool.

He drank deeply from the wine and closed his eyes. Sue Ellen emerged from the ocean's surf and ran toward him, her long blonde hair floating in a halo around her. She lay across the beach towel her breath coming in short heavy gasps. He patted her dry then reached for the suntan lotion. She rolled on to her back. A dog's barking awakened him from the dream. Automatically, he looked toward Sue Ellen's and the pool. No one was around. Putting on his sunglasses, he turned to where he had left off reading in the paperback.

. . .

ODYSSEYS

Elizabeth looked several times into the rear view mirror as she sped toward the paved road at the end of the gravel street. She watched Joe, his muscular legs pumping rhythmically as he ran up the lawn to the front steps of his side of the duplex. And she remembered one of the young couple's arguments as it had filtered through the walls to her bedroom. How he had nearly begged for sex and how she had refused and how he had threatened... She switched on the radio. Again she saw Joe, this time in his swimming trunks. The unmistakable bulge in front and she tried to force the vision from her mind by staring at the speedometer. Her hand shook as she lit the cigarette. She recalled her own pregnancy and how pleasant it had been. And how whenever she and her husband made love it had been more relaxed and better. She butted her cigarette and turned up the volume on the radio.

. . .

Joe, after searching through his dresser drawers and the pockets of his dirty uniforms, found enough change for a quart of beer. He crammed the money into the cellophane wrapper of his pack of cigarettes.

"Damn the heat," he shouted as he ran across the lawn to his bike.

As he revelled the motor, Mrs. Hansen stepped on to her front porch. She noticed the wild expression on his face.

"You going to get killed on that thing one of these days," she shouted and began shaking her dust mop toward him and the street.

He fishtailed the bike from the grass on to the gravel road then slowed in front of Sue Ellen's house. Her front door was open. The youngest child was crawling naked across the living room rug, the older girl following her. Sue Ellen wasn't in sight. He envisioned her in the shower, her plump body lathered with soap. Again he gunned the bike's motor.

. . .

Elizabeth pulled into the parking lot of the Twelfth Street Laundromat. After looking inside, she decided she would do her laundry later. The heat generated by the large dryers plus the crowd of screaming children and their frantic mothers was more than she could tolerate. Anyway, she thought, it's open twenty-four hours. She carried her basket of dry cleaning across the street. The cleaner's also was very hot. She quickly stuffed the dry cleaning receipts into her purse and hurried back outside.

She stood on the curb, her dark glasses pushing painfully against the bridge of her nose. She thought of returning home where she could just lay around until it cooled. Decided against that because her fan was broken. Anyway... She looked at her watch and decided to go to a pizza place where she could get a cold beer and something to eat.

She sat in the back booth, directly in front of the air conditioner. The cool blueness of the dimly lit tavern had a relaxing effect. She lit a cigarette and looked into the wall-length mirror beside her. The customers in her section were mostly businessmen who wore sports coats and ties and sat with neatly dressed secretaries and store clerks. On the other side of the swinging doors, where the bar was located, sat the not so well dressed working men with their sleeves rolled up and large frosted mugs of beer in front of them. When they laughed it was loud and happy and their back muscles tightened against their sweaty shirts. She watched the bartender, a gray haired man with dull eyes as he tried to keep pace with the noon rush.

"Ya, ya, okay," he shouted to someone at the end of the bar.

Elizabeth wished she had brought something to read, to take the pain out of what she knew was going to be a long wait. After all, they haven't even brought me a menu yet, she thought.

. . .

"Would you mind putting that beer in a double bag?" Joe asked the clerk. "I'm on a bike and it might fall out the bottom."

The clerk, a thin faced young man with bad acne, frowned.

"Bags are a penny a piece," he said, his small eyes glaring past Joe toward a group of young boys walking toward the store.

Joe gave him two extra pennies and left.

. . .

The waitress slapped the leather covered menu on to Elizabeth's table.

"Take your time," she said and hurried toward a group of businessmen near the front of the tavern.

. . .

Joe again slowed in front of Sue Ellen's house. He thought of offering her a cold beer, changed his mind and sped on. Her house had seemed quiet except for the muffled sounds from a television or radio.

He drank deeply from the cold beer, stripped off his t-shirt, and looked around for the book he had been reading. After reading about ten pages he decided to visit Sue Ellen and to invite her and her husband up for supper a week from Friday night.

. . .

Mrs. Hansen pushed the heavy vinyl chair closer to the television set. During the three years that she had been watching the early afternoon television series, Love In This Land, she had missed only four episodes. She hiked her dress up to her waist, leaned backward into the chair, propped her legs up on the hassock and allowed the comforting breeze from the portable fan to penetrate. She folded her arms above her head. Droplets of cool sweat dripped on to the arms of the chair. Lethargically she shuffled toward the front window to pull the drapes to stop the sun's glare.

"Little tom cat," she said when she saw Joe walking across the lawn to Sue Ellen's house.

. . .

After giving the waitress her order, Elizabeth went across the street to a drug store where she bought several magazines and an extra pack of cigarettes. When she returned, her pizza and beer were on the table.

. . .

Joe rapped lightly on Sue Ellen's screen door. When there was no answer, he rapped again, this time harder.

"Just a minute," she called. "Come on in."

He walked through the almost dark living room toward the kitchen. Sue Ellen, still wearing her swimming suit, hurried past him to the front door.

"I got the air conditioner on," she said, slamming the door.

. . .

The commercial was over when Mrs. Hansen returned to her chair. She unbuttoned the front of her house dress and began dabbing the sweat from between her heavy and sagging breasts. After taking a long drink from her iced tea, she again leaned back and allowed herself to become absorbed in the television program:

"Listen Doctor Reese, this isn't the first time a beautiful young girl has begged for an abortion," the older doctor said leaning forward in his chair.

Mrs. Hansen leaned forward.

. . .

"I'm watching Love In This Land," Sue Ellen said as she walked rapidly toward the kitchen. He noticed the redness of her back and shoulders and the groove on top of her shoulder made by the halter strap.

"I hardly ever watch television," he answered.

. . .

Elizabeth pushed her finger along the rim of her frosted glass of fresh draft beer. The noon rush was over and there were very few customers in the cafe. She turned the pages of the fashion magazine, stopping occasionally to imagine herself wearing this outfit or that. She hoped it would cool off outside. She realized that it would be too long before it cooled. She decided that after she had had another beer or two she would have courage enough to go to a supermarket.

. . .

He leaned against the refrigerator watching Sue Ellen who sat at the kitchen table staring at the television set.

"I thought I would come by and..."

"Shh," she interrupted him and leaned forward to better hear the murmured conversation between the young girl and the elderly gentleman standing in front of a cheap hotel.

He stared at the whiteness of her almost completely exposed breasts.

"Today's Love In This.." she clicked off the television.

She adjusted her halter straps then turned to him.

"You want a glass of kool-aide," she asked.

"No, I just had a cold beer," she said. "I came by to see if you and your husband would like to come up for supper next Friday night."

"I'll ask Bobby Joe but I think it will be all right," she said over her shoulder as she walked toward the living room.

He followed her.

She stood with her back to the air conditioner. He sat at the bar facing her.

"You must be off today," she said.

"Ya, I am."

She reached behind herself and undid the hooks holding her halter. She sighed, liking the feeling of her breasts being free and at the same time, covered.

"I'll bet your wife is just miserable in this heat," she said. She faced the air conditioner, wanting it's coolness to ease the pain that radiated across her thighs.

"You've got a pretty bad burn," he said, noticing the whiteness of where she had been protected by her swim suit.

"Oh, it feels so good and cold," she said, stepping closer to the air conditioner.

"I have some suntan lotion up at the house," he stared at the veined underside of her right breast. "You want me to go and get it."

Cupping her hands over the front of her swim suit, she again faced him.

"It is beginning to sting."

He noticed the deep redness of her thighs and her belly.

"I don't think I'll ever go out in the sun again," she said.

. . .

Elizabeth walked rapidly across the parking lot toward the supermarket. Her blouse stuck to her sweaty back, making her feel dirty. She welcomed the coldness of the store. The pizza and beer churned in her stomach as she quickly pushed the shopping cart between the isles. She had hoped the place would not be crowded, but unfortunately, everyone seemed to be seeking refuge from the heat in the same manner.

. . .

By the time he reached the front door of his duplex, Joe was sweating badly. He rummaged through the house until he found the suntan lotion which he tucked into the waistband of his swim trunks. In the bathroom he washed his chest and underarms and put on fresh deodorant. He was at the front door when he remembered the opened quart of beer. After placing the beer in a bag with the suntan lotion, he decided there wouldn't be enough for his purposes and again he rummaged through the house, this time, looking for the checkbook.

. . .

Sue Ellen felt relief beneath the cool spray of the shower. For the moment, she wished Joe was not returning with the suntan lotion. She knew too though, that once out of the shower and dry, her burn would hurt even worse than before.

She stood dripping in front of the bedroom fan, not wanting to use a towel against her sensitive skin. The bed looked inviting and she wanted to take a nap but she knew that the sheets also would become another source of pain.

. . .

When Elizabeth saw the long line in front of the meat counter, she decided to postpone her shopping. She abandoned her cart near the fresh vegetables then hurried to the front of the store. Not wanting to return to a tavern, and at the same time, seeking coolness in a place that was not crowded, she again found herself standing on a curb. She saw a movie marquee.

. . .

Joe, not caring whether or not the check bounced, stopped at a liquor store and bought a pint of vodka. He tucked the bottle into the waistband of his trunks and covered it with his shirt then again started toward home.

He felt light headed and free as he pulled on to the lawn in front of the duplex. Visions of him and Sue Ellen followed him through the house to the kitchen table where he had left the suntan lotion. He crammed the bottle of lotion into his waistband next to the pint of vodka. He

smiled when he looked at the clock and realized that Mary wouldn't be home for a long time.

. . .

Mrs. Hansen, having fallen asleep at the end of Love In This Land, was unaware of the fly that crawled along the curve of her right breast. It stopped to rapidly brush its forelegs together then moved on, seeming to savor the trickles of sweat that rolled into the valley between her breasts.

. . .

"Just a minute," Sue Ellen answered the knock on the front door. She hurriedly searched through her dresser drawers hunting for a pair of shorts and a halter.

"The door's open," she hoped her shouting would not awaken the children.

Joe set the vodka and suntan lotion on the kitchen table. The portable television had been pushed against the wall.

"I'm in the bedroom," she called. "I'll be out in just a minute."

He looked around the kitchen, his gaze fell upon: a calendar advertising a local bank, the sink full of dirty dishes, and the refrigerator. He wondered how she knew it was him who had just come into the house, or if she thought it was her husband.

"That's you isn't it, Joe?" she said, her voice tinged with doubt.

"Ya," he answered. "And I brought your suntan lotion."

Sue Ellen decided that shorts and a halter would be too painful. Instead, she slipped on a light robe that, although it didn't hurt, was mildly irritating. She stood in front of the mirror, remembering how he had stared at her earlier and how it had made her feel. It had been a long time since a man had looked at her that way. She dabbed perfume behind her ears and between her breasts. In fact, she thought, all Bobby Joe has ever been able to do is find fault and threaten to go out on me. It was more than a threat and she knew he had been having affairs. She knew too that her husband wouldn't be home for several hours because this afternoon he would go directly from his beat to a club where he worked as a security guard.

. . .

The theater was dark and cool and the seats around her were empty. Elizabeth leaned backward, stretched her legs and relaxed. Later, she quietly groped in her purse until she found the package of mints she had bought earlier. She allowed the coolness of the mint to trickle down the back of her throat.

. . .

Joe didn't know what brand of perfume Sue Ellen was wearing but he did know that if he ever again smelled it, he would be reminded of her and the way she looked at that moment. She stood in the doorway, her face scrubbed and

fresh appearing. She was wearing fresh lipstick and had combed her hair. Her hands played nervously along the top of the lavender colored robe.

"Ah, I thought some vodka might help too," he said.

"Thanks, anything that deadens will help," she answered.

She took a can of frozen orange juice from the freezer and began mixing it.

"This is all I have to mix it with."

"That's fine."

He mixed the drinks, making them quite strong. They sat at the kitchen table, neither really knowing what to say next.

. . .

Mrs. Hansen, after swatting at the fly that crawled along her ear, awakened quickly and looked at the clock. Instinctively, she stood and buttoned her dress. In the kitchen, she opened a package of Graham crackers and set out a quart of milk. She knew her children would; today, like every day, expect a snack when they arrived home from school. She also made a mental note of what she was going to have for supper and how long it would take to prepare.

. . .

"In living color, the first time for adult audiences..."

Elizabeth watched intently the preview of "Coming Attractions." The young male raced after the woman who ran across the flower covered mountain pasture. The wind blew her long hair as he held her in his arms and stared intently into her deep blue eyes. He kissed her tenderly on the forehead.

CUT TO:

INT. TENEMENT HOUSE-DAY:

The young man and woman are warming themselves over a gas heater.

WOMAN

I love you and respect you. But what you ask is impossible.

YOUNG MAN

But is it really? I mean he's always treated you bad, and you yourself have come out and said you don't love him.

CLOSE SHOT THE WOMAN:

Tears begin to trickle from her eyes.

WOMAN

But what will you do when I get old?
And ugly.

. . .

Sue Ellen, sitting on the couch and facing Joe, drank deeply from her second drink.

Joe, a drink in his hand, leaned against the kitchen doorway. He looked first at Sue Ellen then at the stereo beside the reclining chair. He noticed the unopened record album on top of the bar.

"You belong to a record club?" he asked.

"Umm hu, that one just came today," she said. "You want to hear it?"

Joe began drumming his fingers on top of the bar. Sue Ellen, as though to adjust the sound, bent over the turntable.

"Where's that suntan lotion?" she asked as she nervously undid the top two buttons of her robe. "I really think I need it."

The music, when he returned from the kitchen with fresh drinks and the suntan lotion, was soft and slow. He set the drinks on the coffee table in front of Sue Ellen who had stretched out on the couch so that her feet rested on one of its arms and her head on the other. She had parted her robe so that the air could get to her sunburned legs. He saw the distinct line of where her swim suit ended and the sunburn began.

"Ah, where do you want me to start?" he said, holding the bottle of lotion in front of himself.

She looked at the bottle then stared at him. For the first time, she noticed the smoothness of his almost hairless body. To her, he seemed a spring on the threshold of explosion. She closed her eyes and imagined herself as Nurse Adams of Love In This Land. And he became young Doctor Reese, the intern.

"Or would you rather put it on yourself?"

Briefly she opened her eyes and smiled at him.

"No, you do it," she answered. She again closed her eyes. God, she thought, I hope the kids don't wake up. "My shoulders hurt the most."

. . .

Elizabeth tried to ignore the man who had taken the seat next to hers. At the same time, she knew that he was assessing her. She wiggled uncomfortably in her seat, crossed and recrossed her legs. He, as though to relax, leaned very close to her. His arm brushed hers. She moved her arm quickly away and thought of going to the lobby and complaining to the usher. But what could she say? Had he really bothered her? She tried not to think of him and to concentrate on the movie.

. . .

After freeing her arms from the robe, Sue Ellen turned on to her stomach. He pulled the robe downward to the waistband of her panties.

"That feels so cold," she said as he squirted the lotion on to her back.

His hands worked quickly and firmly against her reddened flesh.

"Please, not so hard," she said.

Finishing her back, he wiped his hands on his swim trunks then drank deeply from his drink. He lifted the robe from her legs.

"Here, give it to me," she said.

"No, you do it," she answered. She again closed her eyes. God, she thought, I hope the kids don't wake up. "My shoulders hurt the most."

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"Here, give it to me," she said.

She laid the robe across the arm of the couch. He began working the lotion smoothly and gently along the back of her legs to her ankles.

"Turn over and I'll get the other side," he playfully slapped her butt.

"Wait until I go and check the kids," she sounded as though she had just awakened.

. . .

Mrs. Hansen set the package of frozen pork chops in a pan of water.

. . .

When she could no longer tolerate the labored breathing of the man next to her, Elizabeth prepared to leave. As she reached for her purse, his hand covered hers. She wanted to scream but couldn't. Instead, she jerked her hand violently away then raked her fingernails along his forearm. His grunt followed her as she hurried from the theater.

. . .

Sue Ellen smiled at her children who continued to sleep soundly. The gentle firmness of Joe's hands lingered on the backs of her legs. After closing the door to the children's room she hurried across the hall to the bathroom. She fitted herself with a diaphragm.

Joe helped himself to the pack of cigarettes on top of the bar, finished his drink, and wondered what was taking Sue Ellen so long.

. . .

Mrs. Hansen listened to her children playing in the back yard. She felt uncomfortable in the housedress and decided to change clothes and to freshen up before her husband, Harold, arrived home from work. She set the pot of potatoes on the stove then hurried to the bedroom where she put on a pair of shorts and a clean blouse. Even then, she continued to sweat and knew her Harold would be angry because she smelled. I sweat so much because I work so hard, she thought as she dabbed bath powder between her breasts and sprayed her underarms.

. . .

When Sue Ellen returned to the living room she again wore her robe. Joe, sitting in the reclining chair, tossed the bottle of suntan lotion into the air and caught it.

After returning to the couch, she finished her drink and held the empty glass toward Joe.

"My thighs feel like they're on fire," she said.

. . .

The traffic was heavy as Elizabeth drove across town toward home. Thinking about how little she had accomplished, she felt depressed. The feel of the hand of the strange man in the theater lingered in her mind. She turned right on Eighth Street and continued to Twelfth where she turned left. Two blocks later, she found a parking place near the liquor store.

. . .

Joe's hand trembled as he lifted the bottle of suntan lotion from the coffee table.

"Do it the way you did the backs of my legs," she smiled at him.

He watched the stream of milky lotion slide slowly toward the crevice between her breasts. He began rubbing slowly and firmly, his hands working their way downward. He stopped and played with her breasts. She tilted her head backward and moaned. He kissed her and slid his hands along her smooth stomach to her moist and hairy pubis.

. . .

Mrs. Hansen, standing in front of the bathroom mirror, brushed her teeth until her gums were sore. Her smile quickly turned to a frown when she focused on the blackness of the decay between her front teeth. She blamed the decay on her not having enough milk when she was carrying her last child.

. . .

Sue Ellen savored the coolness of the suntan lotion as its stream spat from her ankles to her thighs. She tried to lie very still and to be very calm as she waited for him to begin rubbing the lotion in, at the same time, she hoped he would start with the bottoms of her feet. She wished she had another drink. A very strong one, anything...

"Please, please, not so hard," she moaned as his hands pressed and kneaded the burned flesh of her upper thighs.

"I have a sunburn. Remember?"

"I'm sorry," he said.

. . .

Mrs. Hansen searched through the refrigerator until she found the makings for a green salad.

. . .

Elizabeth tucked the paper bag containing the bottle of gin under her arm and hurried from the liquor store. She set the bag on the seat beside her. For the first time since leaving the theater, she felt comfortable.

. . .

"God, oh god," Sue Ellen moaned. She reached forward until her hands rested on the waistband of Joe's swim trunks.

He pulled off her panties then buried his head against her naked pubis.

"Yes, yes," she stroked the back of his head.

He stood and quickly peeled off his swim trunks.

"Oh, my god," she said as his legs pressed against hers.

"It hurts too much."

He lowered himself until their abdomens were touching. He pressed harder but was still unable to enter.

"My stomach is on fire," she whined. "Please stop. You have to stop," her voice became loud and angry.

Both stopped and frantically grabbed their clothes when they heard the muted cries of the baby.

"I'm too badly burned," she said as she buttoned her robe.

He didn't answer and walked slowly to the front door.

"If one wakes up, they both do," she said.

He looked at her then at the couch and the bottle of suntan lotion on the coffee table next to the empty drink glass.

He opened the door then turned back.

"You may as well keep the suntan lotion," he said.

She came to his side and gripped his arm.

"There will be other times," she said. The baby's screams became louder. "If one's awake, they're both awake."

. . . .

OVERTIME

Because her room had finished early, Mary was sent to early lunch. When she returned, she was told to relieve in room where they were late getting started on a total abdominal hysterectomy.

"It looks as though this case will be running into the late afternoon," the supervisor said. "And anyway, you're posted to work overtime today."

She looked at the clock in the scrub room. Its second hand swept slowly around as she began her ten minute scrub. Even though she had propped her leg up during her lunch break, it continued to hurt. The ache had been replaced by a burning sensation. She wanted to cry and wished she was home and in bed. She knew Joe would be angry if he had to wait for her. And that he would be especially mad if she didn't get off in time to go grocery shopping. The baby inside her began to kick. She rinsed the lather from her hands and arms. Pushing back her tears, she backed through the double door into the room.

Using the forceps, the circulating nurse handed her a sterile towel to dry with.

"Would you do me a favor?" Mary asked as she dried her hands. "Would you have someone call my husband and tell him not to come after me. That I'll call when I get off."

"Sure," and the circulating nurse hurried from the room.

Mary got a report from the scrub nurse.

The circulating nurse returned and said that they had tried to call but no one answered. She said they would try again later.

Mary slapped the hemostat loudly into the first assistant's hand, at the same time, she reached for another handful of clamps.

"Hey, not so hard," he said. "You want to bruise me?"

"No, sir."

They had gotten into some heavy bleeding and had not yet been able to find the source.

"How's her pressure holding out?" asked the chief resident.

The anesthetist, a young girl who reminded Mary of a mouse, leaned over the top of the drapes.

"Not bad. But I think we had better send for another unit of blood," she said.

The pain in Mary's leg had again turned to a dull ache. She tried shifting her weight from one foot to the other. It didn't help.

They located the source of bleeding and controlled it. While the surgeon began placing lap packs around the uterus, Mary prepared the heavy chromic ties she would need for the larger vessels and the fallopian tubes.

After clamping the uterus with two large Allis clamps, the surgeon lifted it upward and began dissecting around it.

"Here, here," he said to the first assistant. "Feel that. If it isn't cancer, I don't know what the hell is."

The first assistant ran his hand across the top of the uterus.

"Just like golf balls," he said.

Mary, using the edge of the table, pried off her shoes. The cold floor felt very good against her swollen feet.

After fishing ten more bloody sponges from the kick-bucket beside the table, the circulating nurse carried them to the far wall where she weighed them and tied them in a bundle.

. . .

Joe felt better after a cold shower and a nap. He thought of Sue Ellen and everything that had happened and felt sick to his stomach. After drinking a large glass of ice water, he hurried through the house picking up dirty clothes and stuffing them into a pillow case.

. . .

"Finish closing," the resident told the first assistant. "I'm going to the recovery room and write the orders."

Mary quickly threaded the heavy chromic on to the large round needles. She then prepared the lighter plain sutures for the subcutaneous stitches and the silk for the skin.

. . .

Sue Ellen, after Joe left, took another shower and covered herself with what was left of the suntan lotion. She searched through the medicine cabinet until she found the bottle of pain pills she had been given when she had to have her wisdom tooth extracted. She took two of the pills. Her stomach and the front of her legs had already begun to blister.

. . .

"I'm ready for the dressing," the intern extended his hand toward Mary. "And you better have the orderly go for the bed."

She handed up a soaked sponge then began undoing the drapes, tossing the towel clips into the basin with her dirty instruments. Using a hemostat, she removed the blades from the knife handles. She wetted a sponge with ace adherent and set it on the end of her Mayo stand.

. . .

Joe set the pillow cases stuffed with dirty clothes on the front porch. He wondered why Mary had not phoned. She usually did when she was going to be late. Looking at the motorcycle, he realized he would have to make two trips to the laundromat. He decided it could wait until after supper.

. . .

Elizabeth felt much better after a strong drink and a hot bath. She carried her fresh drink into the living room where she sat with her feet propped up listening to the stereo and the street's sounds. The Hansen children, as every

evening, were playing cowboys and Indians.

. . .

Mary pushed her dirty instrument tray into the clean-up room. Mrs. Redding, an old lady with arms like a man's hurried toward her.

"You look peaked dearie," she said. "If you ain't careful you're gonna drop that young-un right here."

"Here," Mary said handing Mrs. Redding a basin. "I put the Ob. Gyn. specials in here. They're going to need them for the first case in the morning."

. . .

When Sue Ellen could no longer tolerate the pain of the sunburn, she phoned Bobby Joe at the station. He said he would find someone to take his place at the lounge. She thanked him and said she would try to cook supper. He told her not to bother.

. . .

Mary's right leg began to feel very hot as she rode the elevator from the sixth floor to the first. An intense pain radiated from her ankle to her thigh to her chest. She gasped and leaned against the side of the elevator. She knew the people she passed on the way to the lobby must be staring at her.

. . .

When Joe phoned the hospital to check on Mary, the supervisor told him that she had already left. He presumed she

had found a ride home. Again he sat on the front porch. He watched the Hansen children run to meet their father. The oldest boy picked up the football and aimed it at his father who went out for a pass. As he watched, Joe prayed silently that Mary would bear him a son.

He smiled then laughed aloud and was quite proud of himself as he sped up the gravel road toward the store where he would buy the steaks, the wine, the flowers and candles and hurry home and try to have it ready by the time Mary arrived or by the time she had taken a bath and had a nap.

. . .

Sitting in the lobby, Mary rested her leg across the couch. She wanted to scream but all of her strength was needed for breathing. She began to feel weaker and light headed. She didn't know why but she wondered if Joe had done the laundry. The baby inside her had been very still for several hours now. She sighed, folded her hands over her abdomen and closed her eyes.

. . .

Joe rushed through the store selecting the items needed for his surprise dinner. He rushed past the baby food counter, backed up, and decided that if he bought one or two jars per trip he would have a healthy supply by the time the baby came. He also bought a pair of blue booties and kept telling himself to think positive. He wanted to do something really silly like buying a football.

. . .

Mary had a very sharp pain in her chest then she felt as though she were in a warm shower. She smiled at the visions unfolding before her. She saw her mother and father floating past. Her first bike. The horse she had read about when she was ten years old and Joe and herself riding the bike along a country road. She saw the baby inside her that looked like the baby pictures of Joe that Joe's mother had shown her. Mary was dead.

. . . .

Joe lighted the candles, put the flowers in water, then began pacing back and forth across the living room waiting for Mary to come home. He again called the hospital. Again the supervisor assured him that she had already left. It was dark. The mercury street lamps flickered then stayed. His excitement turned to anger. The phone rang and he knew it was her. On the way to answering it, he rehearsed what he would say to her about calling when she was going to be late. Before the caller could identify himself Joe said:

"Mary for Christ's sake why..."

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BYRTUS, WILLIAM A. A Cold Summer Heat. (1971) Directed
by: Mr. Fred Chappell. Pp. 69.

The rather long short story or short novel, A Cold
Summer Heat, has been written as a requirement for my
masters thesis. Any conclusions, philosophic or otherwise,
should be arrived at through the interaction of the work and
the reader.

A COLD SUMMER HEAT

by

William A. Byrtus

A Thesis Submitted to
the Faculty of the Graduate School at
The University of North Carolina at Greensboro
in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Fine Arts

Greensboro
1971

Approved by

Fred Chappell
Thesis Adviser

APPROVAL PAGE

This thesis has been approved by the following
committee of the Faculty of the Graduate School at The
University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

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I wish to thank Fred Chappell, my thesis director,
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W.A.B.

Grad. Advisor, _____
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This thesis has been approved by the following
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April, 19, 1971

Date of Examination

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WALLS

ELIZABETH PEARCE

Elizabeth Pearce walked briskly up the concrete walk toward her side of the red brick duplex. Her lab coat, draped over her thin, white arm, swayed gently in the warm breeze. Opening her purse, she rummaged through credit card slips, loose change, and cosmetics for the house key, reminding herself to put it on a chain with the ones for the car. She draped her coat over the porch's wrought iron handrail. Though she didn't know why, after unlocking the door, she turned back and sat on the top step, perhaps because it was early Spring. She watched a dog sniffing along the white picket fence of the house across the street. Throwing her head backward, she breathed deeply of the afternoon air, knowing that soon the evening air would smell of barbecue smoke from grills.

She watched Mrs. Hansen, a housewife who lived on the corner next to the vacant lot, as she hurried down the back steps, a basket of wet clothes propped against her wide hip, a plastic bag filled with clothes pins clutched tightly between her teeth. The Hansens lived in the only house on the street that was not a rented duplex. They had four children whose ages ranged from four to thirteen. Yes, and in a few minutes the older ones will be making their way noisily up

the street, thought Elizabeth. She looked at their yard that was cluttered with toys and had only a few patches of grass along the fence. Their arrival will be the end of a quiet afternoon and the beginning of a loud evening. She sighed and leaned farther backward, propping herself on her elbows. Squinting her eyes, she watched the clouds as they formed pictures. A dog chased a cat that changed into a baby crawling after a kite with a long tail. They all merged into a muscular young man with rather long arms that were spread and reaching toward her. Aware of the pain in her elbows, she sat up and ran her slender fingers through her long brown hair. A large shadow passed quietly over the duplexes across the street. From a few, the garbled voices of the afternoon soap operas drifted toward her. She stood when she heard Mrs. Hansen's door slam. She remembered her own laundry and that if she didn't do it soon, she wouldn't have a blouse to wear to work. Setting her purse and lab coat on the dining room table, she returned for the mail: a light bill, bank statement, and a catalogue. She sat in the chair in front of the window next to the console, her feet propped on a hassock. She had left the front door open, enjoying the Spring breeze filtering through the screen to gently caress her legs. She stood and quickly closed the door when she heard a motor bike turning on to the gravel street.

JOE AND MARY LAUREL

Mary Laurel, her fingers locked around her husband's waist, hoped they wouldn't slide sideways on the loose gravel. Her pregnant belly pushed tightly against Joe's firm back. She moaned and wished they would hurry and get home. She had liked the bike when they were dating and just after they were married. But now, it cramped her legs and would awaken the baby within her who had already begun turning and kicking.

"Don't hold on so tight," Joe shouted over the drone of the bike.

Leaning to the right, Joe watched the bike's front wheel cut smoothly through the gravel. He had a sudden impulse to violently squeeze the handbrake, instead he braked gently and stopped near Elizabeth's Falcon that was parked in front of the duplex.

"You may as well get off," he said. "And I'll take her up the hill."

He had heard Elizabeth's door slam and decided to make it worth her while by needlessly gunning the motor before climbing the grassy knoll in front of the apartment.

Mary took off her sweater as she walked slowly toward the duplex's front door. She didn't look in the mailbox, instead, she opened the screen and leaned against the wrought iron handrail to wait for Joe.

Mary, in the bedroom, was lying across the double bed, her uniform unbuttoned, her bra unsnapped. Her legs, breasts,

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Mary, in the bedroom, was lying across the double bed, her uniform unbuttoned, her bra unsnapped. Her legs, breasts,

and stomach all seemed to be aching at the same time. Each radiating different intensities of pain. When she closed her eyes trying to forget, she saw Joe running toward her, his muscular legs digging out tufts of grass, his long but full face smiling; his hair mussed from the helmet fell across his forboding black eyes. At the end of one of his outstretched arms is the house key; the other, stretched behind him, clutches his motorcycle helmet.

Joe propped his feet upon the couch's threadbare and overstuffed arm. He pried off his shoes and began going through the day's mail.

"Hey, there's a letter from your mom," he shouted. "And it's not marked 'Personal Mrs. Mary Laurel'."

THROUGH THE PARTITION

Elizabeth, after slamming the door on the approaching motorbike, went to the console where she searched through a stack of records until she found her favorite Benny Goodman album. Prying her shoes off, she again propped her feet on the hassock and wiggled her toes then reached down and massaged them, allowing the music to soothe her mind and drive away the lingering cries of children who had come into the clinic that day.

She had watched the young couple the day they moved into the other side of the duplex. Since then, she had little to do with them and resented their rather noisy behavior. At times, she had almost phoned to ask them to turn down the music or to please not yell so loud when they argued, which they did frequently.

. . .

"Hey, we got any beer left?" Joe shouted.

Mary, continuing to lay with her eyes closed, became fascinated with the bizzare patterns of red, yellow, and green light unfolding before her.

"Hey, we got any beer left?" Joe again shouted, this time cupping his hands around his mouth.

"It's in the refrigerator," she called back. "Unless you drank it all."

She stared at the cracks in the light blue paint covering the bedroom ceiling. Lowering her gaze, she watched a roach feeling its way across the dresser toward a box of bath powder.

"Ya, well get me one."

Sorting through the pile of magazines and newspapers on the coffee table in front of him, Joe picked up an old issue of "Panther", skimmed the advertisements for rubber products and nude films, looked briefly at the fold-out then began reading a story. Parts of the story seemed familiar but he couldn't remember its ending: "Continued on page 78".

"Hey, what's for supper?" he called, flipping the pages toward the back of the magazine.

"She stood in front of me, wearing this fantastic dress made out of some kind of see through material that clung like ..."

. . .

Elizabeth reversed the records on the console. In the kitchen, she set out a T.V. dinner and mixed herself a gin and tonic. She returned to the gold velvet covered chair beside the living room window. She slipped off her hose, their crumpled brownness became a thick pile on the blue carpet beside the leather hassock. Unbuttoning her white work blouse, she again remembered the stack of dirty clothes that would mildew unless she took them to the laundry. She hated laundromats and the people who frequented them who sat staring

blankly at the clothes tumbling in the dryers and the children that ran up and down the aisles shouting for cokes and money for the bubble gum machines.

She stood and curled her toes into the thick carpet and moved unthinkingly toward the bathroom. Staring at the initialed towels hanging from the rack, she decided it was too cool for a hot bath and not hot enough for a cool shower.

. . .

"Hey, where's that beer? Joe shouted. "Is it going to take all day?"

Mary sat on the edge of the bed. This weight, this damned pushing weight, she thought. She finished taking off her uniform and brassiere and felt embarrassed about taking off the tight undies that cut into her swollen belly. Instead, she pushed them down and inspected the deep welt across what had been her naval.

. . .

Elizabeth mixed herself another drink, at the same time, she reminded herself to buy more gin and mix.

. . .

"You won't even give me time to change clothes," Mary shouted from the bedroom. "Will you, huh?"

She stood in the doorway between the kitchen and living room, looking at Joe who seemed dignified and haughty as he read the magazine. Her blue satin robe felt scratchy against her tender nipples.

"You just couldn't wait," she said. "Could you?"

Joe opened the magazine to the fold-out, looked at it, then at her, as she sat down heavily in the large chair near the coffee table.

"I've got to get this garter off," she said. "It's cutting into my legs."

"So, big deal. Take it off."

She propped her feet on the coffee table and ran her hands along her ankles whose veins were standing out in thick blue knots.

He again thumbed through the magazine, this time concentrating on the advertisements, hoping to find a misplaced censor line so that he might have a glimpse of something real. It's a game like a carnival. They almost, but never do, he thought.

"Sometimes, Joe Laurel, I don't know why I married you."

He held the fold-out above his head and pointed it toward her.

"The feeling is mutual."

He dropped the magazine, stood and walked slowly to her. She bit her lower lip and rubbed her eyes.

"It isn't my fault I look so bad," she said. "If we had some money I could buy maternity clothes and cosmetics."

As he reached for his beer, his hand brushed her swollen robe.

"Oh, well, I don't think it makes a hell of a lot of difference in your condition. Right?"

"Yes, but it does, it really does," she sobbed.

. . .

Elizabeth placed the T.V. dinner in the oven and set the timer. At the kitchen table, she began going over her bank statement: Handi-Pick 2.18, Betty's Beauty Salon 3.12, Duke's Texaco 5.47, A & P Grocery 2.17--.

. . .

Mary banged the doors of the kitchen cabinets as she searched for the bottle of aspirin.

"No. It's not right. Other women look their prettiest when they're pregnant," she shouted. "I look ugly."

. . .

They're about to start again, thought Elizabeth. She carried her drink into the living room where she turned up the volume on the console.

. . .

Joe pretended not to hear and looked out the window at the clothes fluttering on Mrs. Hansen's line. Mary held her hands under cold water and hoped the swelling would go down so she could again put on her rings.

"You've been pregnant before?" he shouted. "I'll bet it was when you were a senior in high school."

He finished his beer and remembered that he hadn't had anything to eat for breakfast and for lunch, he had only

some crackers and chocolate milk that he had been able to steal off one of the wards at the hospital.

He looked at Mary who continued holding her hands under the cold water. He set his beer on top of the letter from her mother. After a long swallow, he began reading the letter:

"Dear Mary, It is very hot here today. Daddy is busy in the shop. My back has been hurting but I really don't think it is bad enough to go to Dr. Stillwell about. Here is the clipping from Nancy Hope's wedding. I hope you are feeling better and wish, for you, that you could quit working."

He skipped over the next few lines remembering that she had written a letter a week since they had been married and how they were all about the same until the last paragraph when she dropped her personal bomb:

"You remember Max Butler, don't you? Well, he is home from the army and has gone into the paint business with his father. He seems to be doing very well and has bought a new car. Max still drops by and asks about you when he visits with daddy and me, which is at least once a week."

Joe crumpled the letter and threw it at the garbage can.

"Who was the father?" he asked. "Max, Mike or Harry?"

Mary turned violently from the sink, a coffee cup poised and aimed at his head.

"You're the meanest person in the world," she screamed running down the hall toward the bathroom. "I hate you. I hate you."

The bathroom door slammed and the kitchen became a silent loneliness except for an occasional high pitched note that filtered through the partition from the apartment next door.

"I was only joking," he shouted.

When there was no answer, he opened a fresh beer and returned to the couch where he again looked through the magazine. He couldn't find anything he had not read at least once. Throwing the magazine against the couch, he began pacing across the room, making about faces at the front door and the living room doorway.

"Hey, what's for supper?" he called. "You gonna cook tonight or not?"

Again there was no response. He slammed the front door when he went out. His first impulse was to get on the bike and ride it as fast as possible along the gravel street. He decided he had better save the gas for getting to work and back.

Mary, unable to stop crying, washed her face several times with cold water, grinding the washcloth against her cheeks, chin, and forehead.

Sitting on the top step of the porch, Joe watched the paper boy slowly make his way up the street. Two houses down, Sue Ellen Feilds emerged to retrieve the paper. She tucked it under her arm, turned, saw Joe on the porch, and waved. He answered by toasting her with his beer.

Joe carried the paper inside, Sue Ellen's wave lingering pleasantly in his mind. He skipped section A and turned to the back of section B where he decoded his horoscope:

"Your--thoughts are--all--on distant places."

Ya, but Sue Ellen's husband is a cop, he thought. And he remembered the afternoon he and her husband, Bob, had drunk beer together. Bob told him about his moonlighting as a truck driver, tile layer and private guard. He kept repeating how he and Sue Ellen "Weren't nothing but plain folk".

"Hey, Mary," he called. "You okay?"

When she didn't answer, he decided to check on her. He tossed his empty beer can into the overflowing garbage can.

He stood in front of the bathroom door. Even this needs painting, he thought, and wanted to drive his fist through the door's ugly thin wood.

"We gonna eat tonight or not?"

The only answer was the noisy sound of water running.

"Why don't you take your bath after supper?"

The water stopped. The door opened slowly. He felt pity, then checked himself, sighed, and leaned against the wall. Her face was covered with red splotches, her eyes were puffed. She sobbed then stopped herself by taking a deep breath. For a moment, he wanted to take her into his arms and hold her tight, the way one might a frightened animal.

"Well?" he said.

"I really wanted to lay down for awhile," her voice quivered. "My leg has been hurting me really bad."

"Since the day you found out you were pregnant that's all I've heard," he shouted at her back. "Your legs, head, back, cramps. Something all the time."

He sat at the kitchen table, in front of him, the evening paper leaned against the empty wine bottle with a plastic rose jutting from its neck. The rose stared at him as he listened to the neighbor's children playing cowboys and Indians. The lightness from the first beers became depression. He rested his head on his folded arms and closed his eyes. An image of himself in uniform in one of the countless bars along the strip appeared before him - alone, at the end of the bar, holding a half empty glass of beer. The barmaid, a plump woman with platinum blonde hair, exaggerated eyes and pencilled eyebrows was wiping down the bar, her heavy breasts and arms swaying thickly with each stroke. She smiles at him, her teeth uneven and cigarette stained. He wants to burst out how lonely he is. She hands him another beer. The rings on her pudgy fingers sparkle.

"Lonely?" The written voice of a character in the story he had read earlier.

He takes the beer, stands, and swaggers to the jukebox where he plays a quarter's worth and slips into the back booth. His heart quickens at the thought of the barmaid sliding

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in beside him, her leg brushing his, her hand...

"I'll start supper. I said, I'll start supper."

He looked up. Mary, standing beside the refrigerator, had taken out a package of hamburger. Her hair was combed and she was wearing fresh lipstick, make-up, and her new pair of bedroom slippers, the ones she had been saving for when she went to the hospital.

"Will you empty the garbage?" she asked.

She tossed the empty hamburger package at the overflowing bag. It bounced off and lay on the cracked linoleum floor. Her face twisted painfully as she stooped to pick up the package.

"Please," she said.

He finished his beer and bent the can.

"Sure."

. . .

Elizabeth, having changed into her after work - work clothes, carried a T.V. tray into the living room. She was quite high and the rug tickled the arches of her feet. She suppressed a giggle and laughed out loud when she had difficulty setting up the tray. She switched off the console and switched on the television set. Almost news time. Oh, to hell with the laundry, she thought. The buzzer on the stove cut into the pre-news advertisements.

. . .

Joe, lying across the couch, closed his eyes and hoped the dream would return. It didn't. The living room's soiled tan walls hung before him.

. . .

Elizabeth ate very little of her roast beef with gravy, mashed potatoes, and green beans. The news, which never seemed to vary, depressed her. The serious drone of the commentator followed her to the back porch where she set the leftover T.V. dinner on the top step for the neighborhood cats.

Searching through the kitchen cabinets, she found what was left of the fifth of gin. She mixed it with what was left of the can of grapefruit juice.

She sat on the top step of the front porch, her drink in one hand, the newspaper in the other. The mercury street lamps flickered then stayed. Their sheets of light cut across telephone poles and television antennas. She watched two lightning bugs, their backs flashing yellow, land in the grass beside the neighbor's motorbike. She felt calm though no longer depressed and prided herself on not feeling lonely the way she usually did. She stretched her legs until the backs of her heels rested against the edge of the bottom step. The young couple next door seem unusually quiet, she thought.

ROOMS

MARY LAUREL AND ELIZABETH PEARCE

Mary Laurel, wearing a pea soup green scrub dress that hung loosely from her shoulders but clung tightly to her pregnant belly, slumped forward in the large chair next to the coffee table. The foetus inside her, perhaps because of the long walk home, began kicking violently. At times, like now, she wished it would die. At first, she had hated the pain it caused, not the baby.

. . .

Elizabeth Pearce draped her thin lavender robe over the bathroom clothes hamper. She tested the water's temperature with her foot and sipped gin and tonic while waiting for the tub to fill.

. . .

Mary bent forward and pressed her hands tightly against her belly. She glared at the framed print of praying hands that hung from the wall opposite her, half aware of the afternoon's shadows as they crept through the room, and unaware of the noisy children playing in the street. Her blood splattered nylons formed a veil over her cracked white nurse's shoes. She leaned backward and propped her feet upon the coffee table. Its sharp edge cut painfully into her swollen ankles and she decided to move to the couch whose overstuffed arm might make a good leg rest.

. . .

The room's heat, the perfumed bath, and her drink, gave Elizabeth lightness and tranquility. She washed herself with slow gentle strokes, appreciating the washcloth's almost rough strength.

. . .

Though the couch was more comfortable, Mary still couldn't relax and felt embarrassed whenever she thought of the day's events. She had been scheduled to scrub in on a Wertheim, an all day case. But had not been able to finish it, and was forced to ask for someone to relieve her. It had been the standing in one spot for so long that had caused her to almost faint over the Mayo stand.

After being relieved by a student, she went upstairs to the lounge, where she ate lemon cookies and drank several glasses of water. The cookies left an oily film on the roof of her mouth. She couldn't find milk, pop, or anything to replace the oil, and felt generally uncomfortable as she started back toward the main operating room. The supervisor met her on the stairs and asked, "What's the matter? Why do you look so bad lately?"

When she didn't answer the supervisor told her to return to room #7 and to make sure the student kept up with the case.

. . .

Elizabeth stepped on to the lavender fluff rug beside the tub. Drying herself, she bent forward and studied the barely discernable stretch marks from the only time she had been pregnant. She reached for her glass of gin and tonic, took three long swallows, and began wiping the fog from the full length mirror.

. . .

After having supplied the student with those items needed to finish the case, Mary retired to a far corner, next to the sterile supply cabinet. She listened to the chief resident's chanting voice as he explained the anatomy and the procedure to the intern. It was the same voice he used when asking for instruments. She laid her head on her folded arms and fell asleep to the rhythmic hiss of the anesthesia machine.

. . .

Her legs, she concluded, even though she was nearing forty, had remained long and supple. Still though, my thighs and waist are too straight - that's what makes my figure masculine. Elizabeth took another step toward the mirror. Her breasts, though not large, had retained their firmness. She studied the mole between them and the two large hairs growing from it. Once she had tried pulling the hairs out with a pair of tweezers. The pain had been too much. Holding a large towel in front of her, she hurried from the bathroom.

. . .

Mary changed from her scrub dress into her satin robe then returned to the overstuffed couch. She didn't know how long she had been dozing but did know that every time she fell asleep she had been awakened by the baby's kicking. Intuitively she realized it was about time for Joe to come home. Impulsively she wanted to pick-up the house and prepare a snack for him. She knew he would be quite hungry because he had left for work with only twenty cents in his pocket. At the same time, she was aware that; now, right now, was the first time in several weeks that she was not having any sort of pain. Anyway, there's really nothing to fix him, she thought.

. . .

Elizabeth tossed the bath towel over her night stand then stretched out across the double bed and pressed the pillow against her breasts, the way an imagined lover might fold himself into her softness. Sheets of light from the mercury lamps outside her window covered her back, buttocks and wide spread legs to her ankles.

First she dreamt she was at a party with her husband whose numerous medals hung loosely from his dress uniform. Several times, she had to push past other officers in order to get to the punch bowl. He smiled mechanically at her and saluted. Her dream switched to a large banquet where she was alone at a very large table staring at three candelabra that floated above mechanical heads that smiled and nodded at

plates of food floating past everyone. She reached for a single apple at the base of the first of the candelabra.

. . .

Mary opened her eyes. The room was dark except for the florescent praying hands. She turned on to her side, pressed her face against the arm of the couch and sobbed, "Why, oh why me."

Later, she went into the kitchen where she had a bowl of graham crackers and milk and re-read a letter from her mother. Underneath the sink she found an unopened Pepsi which she carried to the bedroom. She finished about half the bottle of pop before falling asleep.

. . .

JOE LAUREL AT WORK

At ten thirty, the hospital was quiet except for the occasional voice of the paging operator. In fact, thought Joe, it's unusually quiet for this time of year. He had only three patients on continuous ventilators: two post-operative open hearts in the recovery room and a drug overdose on the respiratory care unit. Both of the post-op hearts seemed stable and their blood gases were excellent. He monitored them quickly and left the recovery room.

The suicide attempt, a female in her late twenties, had taken large doses of: Seconal, Mellaril, and Doriden. Whether or not she survived would probably be determined by the amount of Doriden she had ingested. He had seen several successful attempts because of that particular drug. This one, even though she had been to hemodialysis every day since her arrival, continued to regress.

"Have they drawn any blood gases lately?" he asked the private duty nurse, a young black who at the moment, was reading over the intake and output chart at the foot of the bed.

"The intern was in at ten and drew some," she smiled at him. "I'll go see if they are on the chart yet."

He watched her walk away, her firm buttocks swinging sensually beneath the tight fitting pants suit. Earlier, he had noticed her large breasts and had wondered if they were as dark as her face or if they were lighter where her bra ended.

He removed the protective covering from the respirator, a Bennett MA-1, and studied the lights above the control panel.

While waiting for the nurse to return, he emptied the water trap, refilled the nebulizer and checked the tubing leading from the machine to the patient for leaks. He watched the controlled rise and fall of her chest and again wondered how someone like her; who seemingly had everything, wealth, beauty and a family would want to commit suicide. He checked her pupils, neither responded to light and both remained dilated.

"Here are her blood gases," the nurse said. "Do you want me to read them?"

"Please."

"Her pH is 7.53, PO_2 240 and the PCO_2 is 25," she said.

He again looked at the control panel, decreased the tidal volume from one liter to seven hundred cc's and decreased the percent of oxygen from sixty to forty percent.

"There, that ought to bring her gases within a more normal range," he said.

"Do you really think it will help any?" the nurse uncovered one of the patient's legs.

He replaced the protective cover over the control panel of the respirator.

"I don't know. Does she show any signs of responding?"

"No, not even when I suction out her endotracheal tube." She leaned over him to adjust the I.V.'s microdrip. Her breasts pressed against his back.

He tried to take his mind off what he was feeling and concentrated on the patient who more than ever seemed a suspended state of death.

"At least she did a good job of it," the nurse said. "Most of them just want sympathy. And I can't feel any sorrow for them."

She began rubbing lotion into the bottom of the patient's uncovered foot, her dark hands angrily kneading the toes.

Joe turned to leave then again looked at the nurse.

"I read somewhere once that everyone has thought about suicide at one time or another. Have you?"

"Honey life's just too good for me to think about that," her thick laugh followed him into the hall.

The outside was hot and sticky and pressed against him as he rode toward the duplex. Speeding up did not help. He passed a drive-in on the way, wanted to stop and have a beer but remembered he didn't have enough money even for a pack of cigarettes.

. . .

HOME AGAIN HOME

Before parking the bike on the lawn, he revelled the motor, hoping to alert his wife. The front porch light shone on the mailbox. She hasn't even taken in the mail, he thought, as he stuffed the advertisement and two envelopes into his helmet. He slammed the door loudly behind himself and walked quickly to the kitchen.

He emptied the mail from his helmet on to the kitchen table and hurried toward the bedroom where he switched on the light. Mary, curled into a ball, lay in the center of the rumpled and clothes strewn bed. In fact, it looks worse than when I left, he thought. Her brassiere was on the floor, underpants above the bed, uniforms scattered on top of the dresser, magazines and parts of newspapers littered the floor. He threw his helmet at the top of the hollywood bed, barely missing a half empty bottle of Pepsi.

"Christ almighty," he shouted. "Just look at this place. Look at all the damned dirty clothes."

Mary sat up quickly, stared and blinked her eyes as though she was trying to awaken from a dream.

He rushed around the room picking up clothes and kicking at the papers and magazines.

"What the hell have you been doing since you got off work?" he shouted. "Huh, what?"

She hurried past him and stopped at the doorway.

"Well, if you would go to the laundromat once in awhile," she said. "We wouldn't have such a mess."

Joe spun around to face her, the veins on his neck bulged, his face reddened.

"You're a pig. A damned slob."

He dropped everything except her underpants.

"You won't even put your rust stained undies out of sight," he shouted. "Will you, huh? You have to leave them on top of my pillow."

When he threw them at her, they bounced off her robe and landed at her feet.

"Hide them, bury them, do something with the fucking things."

Her left hand pulled frantically at the top of her robe, she took a quick step toward him and stopped clutching both her hands at her sides.

"And you are so god awful perfect. I have to pick up after you all over the house," she said. "You throw your crap everywhere, not just in the bedroom."

She was sorry she had said anything. She turned back toward the bathroom. Subconsciously, she waited to hear him run toward her and begin slapping her around. He had before. She felt shaky inside and wanted to vomit. She turned back. He was cleaning off the top of the hollywood bed.

"Furthermore, your feet stink," she shouted.

The half full bottle of pop crashed into the wall behind her, barely missing her head, its contents forming brown splotches on the blue robe.

"Ya, well your breath is bad," he ran toward her. "It smells worse than the animal pit at the city dump."

As his words crashed against her face, his hands pinned her arms against the wall. She burst into tears.

. . .

When Elizabeth heard the bottle crash against the wall, she thought it was just another part of the weird dream she had been having. She awakened and stared out the window at the mercury lamp. She wondered what time it was. She remembered her hunger. The muted argument of the young couple followed her to the kitchen.

. . .

"You don't love me, you never have," Mary's voice rose to a whine. "Or else you wouldn't talk this way, you know you wouldn't."

He released her and fell against the opposite wall. His hands trembled and he felt guilty about wanting to crush her wrists, wanting to crush her.

"Ya, well, you ought to be able to take what you put out," he said softly.

As she shuffled past him she lowered her head and stared at the cracks in the paint peeled floor.

"What you said isn't true," he said. "You know it isn't."

She hurried into the bathroom and pulled a long strand of toilet paper from the holder, then began blowing her nose.

"You don't love me," she said between bursts. "You never have loved me."

He went to the bathroom's doorway, started in and stopped. He watched her as she bent forward to turn on the faucets to fill the tub. The swirling water reminded him of the tightness within himself.

"No, no, I don't love you," he said. "I'm just staying on here because the food is so good."

"Do you love me, really?"

He sat on the toilet staring at the tar beneath those tiles that had broken off. A spider looked at him then scurried across the floor toward the bath tub. His first impulse was to step on it and feel its thick middle pop beneath the sole of his shoe. He stopped himself when he remembered reading somewhere that spiders ate insects.

"I guess I love you," he said. "But I like to have things my way. You know what I mean, hun?" He watched the spider disappear beneath the tub. It's probably hunting for roaches, he thought.

. . .

Using mayonnaise and bologna, Elizabeth made herself two sandwiches. She listened to the end of the argument then heard water running. She remembered her own bath and how good it had felt. After cleaning off the table and washing

her plate and glass, she went into the living room where she turned on the television set for the late news. She hoped the late movie would be a good one.

. . .

Mary scrubbed her belly vigorously. Joe watched and thought he would never know how something that once had been so flat could stretch so much.

"Want me to scrub your back?"

When she didn't answer, he took the washcloth and began gently rubbing it up and down along her back. He felt embarrassed about the way he had acted earlier.

"That feels so good," she said.

He looked at the smoothness of her back and the wet hair at the base of her neck. Dropping the wash rag, he slid his hand forward until he was holding one of her engorged breasts.

"Please, take your hand away," she pleaded. "They're sore."

. . .

They lay in bed, she on her side, facing the wall away from him. He pushed against her back, ran his hands over her breasts, and kissed the back of her neck.

"Stop Joe, you know we can't."

"Yes, we can. And it will be good. Anyway, the doctor said..."

"No, I said. You know how it makes my leg hurt afterward." She pushed his hands away and moved closer to the wall.

"Please."

"No, no, I don't want to. I have to be up early so I can go to work," she whined. "Remember?"

"Ya, okay."

He rolled on to his back, folded his hands behind his head and stared at cracks in the ceiling. She lay quietly for a long time, then, when she spoke, it was soft:

"It would be different if I didn't have to work. I mean, if I could stay home and rest and make the house nice," she said. "Like other women."

He slammed his fist into the wall.

"Okay, okay, I'm sorry I'm not rich or that my folks don't have a damn thing. That I don't have a better job. That I got you pregnant. That I was brought up a good Catholic. For everything. Everything," he calmed himself. "Let's just forget it, okay?"

Mary soon was sleeping. He listened to her rhythmic breathing and snoring. When he could no longer tolerate the presence of the bed against his restless back, he got up and went to the kitchen where he lighted a cigarette using one of the stove's burners. He sat at the kitchen table staring at the plastic flower jutting from the top of the wine bottle. He thought of writing a letter to his parents

or one of his old high school buddies. Decided that by the time he found pencil and paper, it would not be worth the effort. He looked through the pile of bills in front of his place at the table: rent, furniture, loan company, clinic, electricity, phone, and he stopped, realizing that it didn't matter, that even with both of them working there was no way to keep up or to pay them. Suddenly, he wanted to cry but couldn't and went into the living room where he found the afternoon paper.

He saw only a few advertisements for part-time help. He had tried that once before. He had lasted only a week, in a filling station at one of the newer shopping centers. Whenever he went to work, the boss, an old man with a thin and very wrinkled face, used to laugh and point to the garage where several flat tires awaited changing. Repairing the flat tires had been easy compared to trying to scrub the grime from his hands before going to work at the hospital each morning. Finally, when his hands began to crack and bleed, he told the old man he wouldn't be back.

. . .

Elizabeth, having awakened, found it difficult getting back to sleep. She propped her pillows against the bed board and turned on the reading lamp. She couldn't become absorbed in the story about a young girl and the frustrations of her "first love". She tossed the magazine on to the floor beside the bed.

In the kitchen, she poured herself a tall glass of gin and tonic. The drink plus the two sleeping pills made it easy and she soon fell into a deep slumber.

. . . .

SUNRISE AND A HOT SUMMER'S DAY

Joe was the first to hear the radio-alarm. He turned toward his wife who continued to breathe deeply in her sleep.

"Hey, you going to work today?"

When she didn't answer, he leaned forward and began shaking her shoulder. Her skin was oily and smooth. He pushed his lips against the side of her neck.

"It's time to get up, honey," he whispered against her ear.

"Huh, what?"

The radio played a popular tune, a rock number. Mary sat up in the bed. Her breasts and swollen belly looked very white in the morning light. He bent forward and kissed where her belly button had been. The foetus inside her kicked. She smelled musty but not unpleasant.

"Don't, please don't. I'm dirty and sweaty," she said.

He moved his hand downward.

"You smell human, and good, not like a bottle of perfume or bath powder or something artificial."

He began kissing along the inside of her thighs.

"Now stop!" She pulled quickly away from him.

"Want me to fix you some breakfast?" he asked.

"No, it would just make me sick." She sat on the edge of the bed rubbing the sleep from her eyes. He rolled on to his stomach and buried his face in the pillow.

A few minutes later he heard her vomiting in the bathroom. He listened, the way he had to her snoring the night before. Then he heard her running water, gargling, and brushing her teeth.

She swallowed her fluid pill and her vitamin pill and was able to force down a cup of beef bouillon before dressing for work.

"You going to take me to work or not?" she stood in the bedroom door, looking at Joe who she knew was only pretending to be asleep. "If we don't hurry, I'll be late."

. . .

When she awoke, Elizabeth still had the taste of gin in her mouth. Automatically, she went to the bathroom to brush her teeth and to gargle. Standing in front of the mirror, she examined the wrinkles beneath her eyes. Oh, damn, she thought, Dr. Meyers is going to give me hell about not taking care of myself. She remembered that it was her day off; stuck her tongue out at the mirror, and hurried back to bed.

. . .

She was waiting on the front porch, her blue sweater folded across her lap.

"It's about time," she said when he burst through the front door.

At first, the bike wouldn't turn over. He cursed it and the already very hot morning. When it finally did crank, he shouted angrily at Mary to hurry up and get on.

"Please don't go so fast. I'm afraid I might fall," she shouted over the bike's din.

"Hang on tighter."

"Let me off. If you are going to drive crazy, I'll walk and be late."

He stopped in front of the main entrance to the hospital. She hurried around to the front of the bike, her face flushing angrily as she leaned over the handle bars to kiss him impersonally on the cheek.

She started toward the double doors leading to the main lobby then turned back:

"Do you think you'll be able to get the laundry done today?"

"I don't know, ya, I guess so," he watched other persons hurrying past her toward the glass doors that reminded him of a mechanical monster's mouth that ate people.

She pulled open one of the doors and held it so others might hurry through. He wanted to shout at her not to go, to not allow herself to become possessed by the disease and suffering inside. She continued to hold the door open, as though she was waiting for him to say something else.

"Please, if nothing else," she shouted. "Get the garbage emptied." And disappeared into the hospital's bright lobby.

He turned up Elder Street toward Fisk where he stopped at a Quick Pick and bought a quart of wine, a paperback book,

and a package of Gouda cheese. He knew Mary would be angry at his having spent the money. Oh, well, he thought, if I do the laundry and buy something really special for supper she won't mind. No, better not buy anything. She'll want to go grocery shopping when she gets off work. Ya, but a nice steak, the candle, and a fresh green salad... He was suddenly aware of the early morning's intense heat. He thought of going to one of the discount houses and writing a bad check for a fan. He turned on to the gravel road leading toward the duplex.

Sue Ellen Fields waved as Joe passed. She and her children were standing around a large plastic swimming pool. She bent forward to test the water in the already half filled pool.

"It's going to be a hot one today," Joe answered her wave, slowed, then gunned the bike up the grassy knoll in front of her house. He stopped beside the pool. One of the smaller girls, maybe she was three or four, ran to the bike.

"Gimme a ride, gimme a ride," she pleaded. "Please."

"Afraid not, you might fall off and break your head," he looked at Sue Ellen who laughed.

"Here, you finish filling it," she handed the girl the hose. "Tell Mary to come on down and have some lemonade when she gets off work."

She walked to the playpen where the baby had begun to cry. She bent forward to look for the pacifier. When she did, her loose blouse opened and her ample breasts were exposed to Joe.

"Ya, I will," he said. "And oh, we'd like to have you and your husband up for supper sometime."

The baby was quiet. She started toward Joe then turned her attention to the girl who had, by this time, turned the hose upon herself.

"Now look what you've done," Sue Ellen shouted. "And that play suit was clean. Now hurry on in the house."

She looked at Joe who watched the girl turn and run quickly to the front door.

"I just don't know what I'm going to do with her," said Sue Ellen. She picked up the still sputtering hose and walked toward the side of the house, her wide buttocks swinging pleasantly beneath the thin material of her tight fitting shorts.

She turned back to Joe. "Tell Mary I have a box of baby clothes for her."

. . . .

It was the morning's heat that finally forced Elizabeth out of bed. After a cool bath and a bloody Mary, she felt prepared for her day off, if not industriously looking forward to it. She opened all the windows in the house then hurried from room to room picking up dirty clothes. She filled two baskets. One for the dry cleaners and the other for washing. She set them beside the front door, put on her scarf, and found her purse and set it on top of the first basket. She remembered that she had left the radio on in the kitchen.

. . .

The paper bag full of garbage already had a small tear in it. Joe picked it up gently and hoped it would hold together until he could get it into the corrugated can at the foot of the back stairs. He was almost there and had leaned over to remove the lid from the can when the bag burst. Cursing, he began picking up the scattered trash. He had a feeling that someone was watching, turned and saw Elizabeth, a green plastic bag clutched in her right hand, standing on her porch trying to keep from laughing. When he noticed her, she hurried inside, slamming the door as she went.

"Pretty damn funny," he shouted to her side of the duplex.

. . .

Elizabeth quickly finished cleaning the kitchen, locked the back door, then hurried through the house looking for any laundry or dry cleaning that she may have missed earlier.

. . .

He had placed the wine in the freezer compartment of the refrigerator immediately after arriving home. He sat on the front porch, his back pressed against the wrought iron hand-rail, tasted the wine which was cool but not yet chilled and left a bitter taste in his mouth. He thumbed through the morning paper then cut himself a wedge of cheese. He looked at the empty glass, decided to go back inside and change into his swimming trunks, that way, he might even be able to get a

little suntan; at any rate, he wouldn't sweat as much. On the way, he refilled his glass, sprinkled in a few drops of saccarin, and added some ice. He stuffed the pocket book, Thrill Grill by Dick Long, into the waistband of his swim trunks then returned to the front porch.

The brightness of the sun made it difficult to read. He closed the book then his eyes and leaned backward to allow the sun's warmth to pulsate against his bare chest. A vision of Sue Ellen leaning over the playpen drifted before him. Beads of sweat formed on his forehead and chest and began trickling down the front of his body. He enjoyed the feeling. The slam of a screen door suddenly alerted him.

Elizabeth, a basket of clothes propped against her hip, backed through the screen on to the porch. When she turned around, she saw Joe. He seemed asleep. She stared at the paperback beside his outstretched leg. She knew she must be blushing.

Joe stood then bent forward and picked up the glass of wine, drained it, then turned back toward Elizabeth's side of the duplex. She lowered her head and hurried toward the steps, the basket of clothes bouncing wildly.

"You need some help?" he reached for the basket's handle.

"Thank you," her voice sounded cold. "You can set them in the back seat."

He set the second basket beside the first. She smiled. It was the first time he had ever seen her smile. She's not bad, he thought, damn long legs. Her screen again slammed. He returned to his spot on the porch, looked past the empty house to Sue Ellen's. The pool was no longer in the front yard. Ya, but not as good as her, he thought. Anyway, Elizabeth's probably almost old enough to be my mother.

. . .

MEANWHILE

Mary glanced at her wristwatch. Oh, god, six more hours. The coldness of the room in which she was circulating nurse penetrated.

"I'll be back in a second," she said to the scrub nurse who was busy cutting suture for the next case. "I'm just going to get a gown to put on."

She pulled the gown tightly around herself then tied it and started back to the room. I wonder if Joe will get the laundry done or if he'll make some excuse like he always does or not do it because he says it makes him feel hen-pecked, she thought. She put on a fresh mask before re-entering the room.

"This is our last case," the scrub nurse said. "Go see how soon before anesthesia's ready to move the patient in."

"I think they're ready."

She helped move the patient into the room. Then, because things were going smoothly, she sat on the stool next to the supply cabinet. She felt warm and comfortable for the first time since she arrived that morning. The case, a routine vein stripping, was over quickly. Afterward, she and the scrub nurse worked together to clean and restock the room.

"You ought to slow down," the scrub nurse said. " 'Cause the sooner we're finished, the sooner we'll have to go somewhere else."

"Maybe so," Mary answered. "But the sooner I'm finished here, the sooner I can take a break."

The supervisor, a thick set read haired woman stopped Mary in the hall. "Finished already?" she said. "If you are, you can go relieve in room #8."

"If you don't mind," Mary answered, "I'd like to take my break first." She turned down the adjacent hall and walked quickly toward the large green door that led to the lounge.

. . .

AND

Joe refilled his wine glass. Again he added ice and saccharin. He felt quite high and tried not to think about Sue Ellen but ended trying to think of an excuse to visit her. Again he read from the pocket book he had bought earlier: "I could tell that she didn't have on a brassiere, not that she really needed one, with a pair like that. Then I let my eyes drift downward..."

The cold shower felt good but did little to sober him. In fact, it made him more aware of the intensity of the day's heat. He remembered the clothes that he had promised to wash and decided it was too hot to go to an even hotter laundromat. He could no longer tolerate the still heat of the bedroom and hoped he might find a breeze in the back yard.

He spread the blanket beneath an Elm tree in the back yard. Again he tried reading from the book but the glare of the sun prevented it. He returned to the house for: sunglasses, suntan lotion, and to refill his wine glass. He heard them before he pushed through the door on to the porch.

Even though the empty apartment separated them, he still had a good view of Sue Ellen and her children as they played in the swimming pool. He focused on Sue Ellen who seemed to be trying to teach the baby how to swim. He continued watching after again making himself comfortable on the blanket. The tight green bathing suit seemed barely able to contain her fullness. Several times the shoulder straps fell

from the suit's top. Finally, she ignored them and allowed her breasts to swing freely as she swooped down to push the child along the edge of the pool.

He drank deeply from the wine and closed his eyes. Sue Ellen emerged from the ocean's surf and ran toward him, her long blonde hair floating in a halo around her. She lay across the beach towel her breath coming in short heavy gasps. He patted her dry then reached for the suntan lotion. She rolled on to her back. A dog's barking awakened him from the dream. Automatically, he looked toward Sue Ellen's and the pool. No one was around. Putting on his sunglasses, he turned to where he had left off reading in the paperback.

. . .

ODYSSEYS

Elizabeth looked several times into the rear view mirror as she sped toward the paved road at the end of the gravel street. She watched Joe, his muscular legs pumping rhythmically as he ran up the lawn to the front steps of his side of the duplex. And she remembered one of the young couple's arguments as it had filtered through the walls to her bedroom. How he had nearly begged for sex and how she had refused and how he had threatened... She switched on the radio. Again she saw Joe, this time in his swimming trunks. The unmistakable bulge in front and she tried to force the vision from her mind by staring at the speedometer. Her hand shook as she lit the cigarette. She recalled her own pregnancy and how pleasant it had been. And how whenever she and her husband made love it had been more relaxed and better. She butted her cigarette and turned up the volume on the radio.

. . .

Joe, after searching through his dresser drawers and the pockets of his dirty uniforms, found enough change for a quart of beer. He crammed the money into the cellophane wrapper of his pack of cigarettes.

"Damn the heat," he shouted as he ran across the lawn to his bike.

As he revelled the motor, Mrs. Hansen stepped on to her front porch. She noticed the wild expression on his face.

"You going to get killed on that thing one of these days," she shouted and began shaking her dust mop toward him and the street.

He fishtailed the bike from the grass on to the gravel road then slowed in front of Sue Ellen's house. Her front door was open. The youngest child was crawling naked across the living room rug, the older girl following her. Sue Ellen wasn't in sight. He envisioned her in the shower, her plump body lathered with soap. Again he gunned the bike's motor.

. . .

Elizabeth pulled into the parking lot of the Twelfth Street Laundromat. After looking inside, she decided she would do her laundry later. The heat generated by the large dryers plus the crowd of screaming children and their frantic mothers was more than she could tolerate. Anyway, she thought, it's open twenty-four hours. She carried her basket of dry cleaning across the street. The cleaner's also was very hot. She quickly stuffed the dry cleaning receipts into her purse and hurried back outside.

She stood on the curb, her dark glasses pushing painfully against the bridge of her nose. She thought of returning home where she could just lay around until it cooled. Decided against that because her fan was broken. Anyway... She looked at her watch and decided to go to a pizza place where she could get a cold beer and something to eat.

She sat in the back booth, directly in front of the air conditioner. The cool blueness of the dimly lit tavern had a relaxing effect. She lit a cigarette and looked into the wall-length mirror beside her. The customers in her section were mostly businessmen who wore sports coats and ties and sat with neatly dressed secretaries and store clerks. On the other side of the swinging doors, where the bar was located, sat the not so well dressed working men with their sleeves rolled up and large frosted mugs of beer in front of them. When they laughed it was loud and happy and their back muscles tightened against their sweaty shirts. She watched the bartender, a gray haired man with dull eyes as he tried to keep pace with the noon rush.

"Ya, ya, okay," he shouted to someone at the end of the bar.

Elizabeth wished she had brought something to read, to take the pain out of what she knew was going to be a long wait. After all, they haven't even brought me a menu yet, she thought.

. . .

"Would you mind putting that beer in a double bag?" Joe asked the clerk. "I'm on a bike and it might fall out the bottom."

The clerk, a thin faced young man with bad acne, frowned.

"Bags are a penny a piece," he said, his small eyes glaring past Joe toward a group of young boys walking toward the store.

Joe gave him two extra pennies and left.

. . .

The waitress slapped the leather covered menu on to Elizabeth's table.

"Take your time," she said and hurried toward a group of businessmen near the front of the tavern.

. . .

Joe again slowed in front of Sue Ellen's house. He thought of offering her a cold beer, changed his mind and sped on. Her house had seemed quiet except for the muffled sounds from a television or radio.

He drank deeply from the cold beer, stripped off his t-shirt, and looked around for the book he had been reading. After reading about ten pages he decided to visit Sue Ellen and to invite her and her husband up for supper a week from Friday night.

. . .

Mrs. Hansen pushed the heavy vinyl chair closer to the television set. During the three years that she had been watching the early afternoon television series, Love In This Land, she had missed only four episodes. She hiked her dress up to her waist, leaned backward into the chair, propped her legs up on the hassock and allowed the comforting breeze from the portable fan to penetrate. She folded her arms above her head. Droplets of cool sweat dripped on to the arms of the chair. Lethargically she shuffled toward the front window to pull the drapes to stop the sun's glare.

"Little tom cat," she said when she saw Joe walking across the lawn to Sue Ellen's house.

. . .

After giving the waitress her order, Elizabeth went across the street to a drug store where she bought several magazines and an extra pack of cigarettes. When she returned, her pizza and beer were on the table.

. . .

Joe rapped lightly on Sue Ellen's screen door. When there was no answer, he rapped again, this time harder.

"Just a minute," she called. "Come on in."

He walked through the almost dark living room toward the kitchen. Sue Ellen, still wearing her swimming suit, hurried past him to the front door.

"I got the air conditioner on," she said, slamming the door.

. . .

The commercial was over when Mrs. Hansen returned to her chair. She unbuttoned the front of her house dress and began dabbing the sweat from between her heavy and sagging breasts. After taking a long drink from her iced tea, she again leaned back and allowed herself to become absorbed in the television program:

"Listen Doctor Reese, this isn't the first time a beautiful young girl has begged for an abortion," the older doctor said leaning forward in his chair.

Mrs. Hansen leaned forward.

. . .

"I'm watching Love In This Land," Sue Ellen said as she walked rapidly toward the kitchen. He noticed the redness of her back and shoulders and the groove on top of her shoulder made by the halter strap.

"I hardly ever watch television," he answered.

. . .

Elizabeth pushed her finger along the rim of her frosted glass of fresh draft beer. The noon rush was over and there were very few customers in the cafe. She turned the pages of the fashion magazine, stopping occasionally to imagine herself wearing this outfit or that. She hoped it would cool off outside. She realized that it would be too long before it cooled. She decided that after she had had another beer or two she would have courage enough to go to a supermarket.

. . .

He leaned against the refrigerator watching Sue Ellen who sat at the kitchen table staring at the television set.

"I thought I would come by and..."

"Shh," she interrupted him and leaned forward to better hear the murmured conversation between the young girl and the elderly gentleman standing in front of a cheap hotel.

He stared at the whiteness of her almost completely exposed breasts.

"Today's Love In This.." she clicked off the television.

She adjusted her halter straps then turned to him.

"You want a glass of kool-aide," she asked.

"No, I just had a cold beer," she said. "I came by to see if you and your husband would like to come up for supper next Friday night."

"I'll ask Bobby Joe but I think it will be all right," she said over her shoulder as she walked toward the living room.

He followed her.

She stood with her back to the air conditioner. He sat at the bar facing her.

"You must be off today," she said.

"Ya, I am."

She reached behind herself and undid the hooks holding her halter. She sighed, liking the feeling of her breasts being free and at the same time, covered.

"I'll bet your wife is just miserable in this heat," she said. She faced the air conditioner, wanting it's coolness to ease the pain that radiated across her thighs.

"You've got a pretty bad burn," he said, noticing the whiteness of where she had been protected by her swim suit.

"Oh, it feels so good and cold," she said, stepping closer to the air conditioner.

"I have some suntan lotion up at the house," he stared at the veined underside of her right breast. "You want me to go and get it."

Cupping her hands over the front of her swim suit, she again faced him.

"It is beginning to sting."

He noticed the deep redness of her thighs and her belly.

"I don't think I'll ever go out in the sun again," she said.

. . .

Elizabeth walked rapidly across the parking lot toward the supermarket. Her blouse stuck to her sweaty back, making her feel dirty. She welcomed the coldness of the store. The pizza and beer churned in her stomach as she quickly pushed the shopping cart between the isles. She had hoped the place would not be crowded, but unfortunately, everyone seemed to be seeking refuge from the heat in the same manner.

. . .

By the time he reached the front door of his duplex, Joe was sweating badly. He rummaged through the house until he found the suntan lotion which he tucked into the waistband of his swim trunks. In the bathroom he washed his chest and underarms and put on fresh deodorant. He was at the front door when he remembered the opened quart of beer. After placing the beer in a bag with the suntan lotion, he decided there wouldn't be enough for his purposes and again he rummaged through the house, this time, looking for the checkbook.

. . .

Sue Ellen felt relief beneath the cool spray of the shower. For the moment, she wished Joe was not returning with the suntan lotion. She knew too though, that once out of the shower and dry, her burn would hurt even worse than before.

She stood dripping in front of the bedroom fan, not wanting to use a towel against her sensitive skin. The bed looked inviting and she wanted to take a nap but she knew that the sheets also would become another source of pain.

. . .

When Elizabeth saw the long line in front of the meat counter, she decided to postpone her shopping. She abandoned her cart near the fresh vegetables then hurried to the front of the store. Not wanting to return to a tavern, and at the same time, seeking coolness in a place that was not crowded, she again found herself standing on a curb. She saw a movie marquee.

. . .

Joe, not caring whether or not the check bounced, stopped at a liquor store and bought a pint of vodka. He tucked the bottle into the waistband of his trunks and covered it with his shirt then again started toward home.

He felt light headed and free as he pulled on to the lawn in front of the duplex. Visions of him and Sue Ellen followed him through the house to the kitchen table where he had left the suntan lotion. He crammed the bottle of lotion into his waistband next to the pint of vodka. He

smiled when he looked at the clock and realized that Mary wouldn't be home for a long time.

. . .

Mrs. Hansen, having fallen asleep at the end of Love In This Land, was unaware of the fly that crawled along the curve of her right breast. It stopped to rapidly brush its forelegs together then moved on, seeming to savor the trickles of sweat that rolled into the valley between her breasts.

. . .

"Just a minute," Sue Ellen answered the knock on the front door. She hurriedly searched through her dresser drawers hunting for a pair of shorts and a halter.

"The door's open," she hoped her shouting would not awaken the children.

Joe set the vodka and suntan lotion on the kitchen table. The portable television had been pushed against the wall.

"I'm in the bedroom," she called. "I'll be out in just a minute."

He looked around the kitchen, his gaze fell upon: a calendar advertising a local bank, the sink full of dirty dishes, and the refrigerator. He wondered how she knew it was him who had just come into the house, or if she thought it was her husband.

"That's you isn't it, Joe?" she said, her voice tinged with doubt.

"Ya," he answered. "And I brought your suntan lotion."

Sue Ellen decided that shorts and a halter would be too painful. Instead, she slipped on a light robe that, although it didn't hurt, was mildly irritating. She stood in front of the mirror, remembering how he had stared at her earlier and how it had made her feel. It had been a long time since a man had looked at her that way. She dabbed perfume behind her ears and between her breasts. In fact, she thought, all Bobby Joe has ever been able to do is find fault and threaten to go out on me. It was more than a threat and she knew he had been having affairs. She knew too that her husband wouldn't be home for several hours because this afternoon he would go directly from his beat to a club where he worked as a security guard.

. . .

The theater was dark and cool and the seats around her were empty. Elizabeth leaned backward, stretched her legs and relaxed. Later, she quietly groped in her purse until she found the package of mints she had bought earlier. She allowed the coolness of the mint to trickle down the back of her throat.

. . .

Joe didn't know what brand of perfume Sue Ellen was wearing but he did know that if he ever again smelled it, he would be reminded of her and the way she looked at that moment. She stood in the doorway, her face scrubbed and

fresh appearing. She was wearing fresh lipstick and had combed her hair. Her hands played nervously along the top of the lavender colored robe.

"Ah, I thought some vodka might help too," he said.

"Thanks, anything that deadens will help," she answered.

She took a can of frozen orange juice from the freezer and began mixing it.

"This is all I have to mix it with."

"That's fine."

He mixed the drinks, making them quite strong. They sat at the kitchen table, neither really knowing what to say next.

. . .

Mrs. Hansen, after swatting at the fly that crawled along her ear, awakened quickly and looked at the clock. Instinctively, she stood and buttoned her dress. In the kitchen, she opened a package of Graham crackers and set out a quart of milk. She knew her children would; today, like every day, expect a snack when they arrived home from school. She also made a mental note of what she was going to have for supper and how long it would take to prepare.

. . .

"In living color, the first time for adult audiences..."

Elizabeth watched intently the preview of "Coming Attractions." The young male raced after the woman who ran across the flower covered mountain pasture. The wind blew her long hair as he held her in his arms and stared intently into her deep blue eyes. He kissed her tenderly on the forehead.

CUT TO:

INT. TENEMENT HOUSE-DAY:

The young man and woman are warming themselves over a gas heater.

WOMAN

I love you and respect you. But what you ask is impossible.

YOUNG MAN

But is it really? I mean he's always treated you bad, and you yourself have come out and said you don't love him.

CLOSE SHOT THE WOMAN:

Tears begin to trickle from her eyes.

WOMAN

But what will you do when I get old?
And ugly.

. . .

Sue Ellen, sitting on the couch and facing Joe, drank deeply from her second drink.

Joe, a drink in his hand, leaned against the kitchen doorway. He looked first at Sue Ellen then at the stereo beside the reclining chair. He noticed the unopened record album on top of the bar.

"You belong to a record club?" he asked.

"Umm hu, that one just came today," she said. "You want to hear it?"

Joe began drumming his fingers on top of the bar. Sue Ellen, as though to adjust the sound, bent over the turntable.

"Where's that suntan lotion?" she asked as she nervously undid the top two buttons of her robe. "I really think I need it."

The music, when he returned from the kitchen with fresh drinks and the suntan lotion, was soft and slow. He set the drinks on the coffee table in front of Sue Ellen who had stretched out on the couch so that her feet rested on one of its arms and her head on the other. She had parted her robe so that the air could get to her sunburned legs. He saw the distinct line of where her swim suit ended and the sunburn began.

"Ah, where do you want me to start?" he said, holding the bottle of lotion in front of himself.

She looked at the bottle then stared at him. For the first time, she noticed the smoothness of his almost hairless body. To her, he seemed a spring on the threshold of explosion. She closed her eyes and imagined herself as Nurse Adams of Love In This Land. And he became young Doctor Reese, the intern.

"Or would you rather put it on yourself?"

Briefly she opened her eyes and smiled at him.

"No, you do it," she answered. She again closed her eyes. God, she thought, I hope the kids don't wake up. "My shoulders hurt the most."

. . .

Elizabeth tried to ignore the man who had taken the seat next to hers. At the same time, she knew that he was assessing her. She wiggled uncomfortably in her seat, crossed and recrossed her legs. He, as though to relax, leaned very close to her. His arm brushed hers. She moved her arm quickly away and thought of going to the lobby and complaining to the usher. But what could she say? Had he really bothered her? She tried not to think of him and to concentrate on the movie.

. . .

After freeing her arms from the robe, Sue Ellen turned on to her stomach. He pulled the robe downward to the waistband of her panties.

"That feels so cold," she said as he squirted the lotion on to her back.

His hands worked quickly and firmly against her reddened flesh.

"Please, not so hard," she said.

Finishing her back, he wiped his hands on his swim trunks then drank deeply from his drink. He lifted the robe from her legs.

"Here, give it to me," she said.

"No, you do it," she answered. She again closed her eyes. God, she thought, I hope the kids don't wake up. "My shoulders hurt the most."

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"Here, give it to me," she said.

She laid the robe across the arm of the couch. He began working the lotion smoothly and gently along the back of her legs to her ankles.

"Turn over and I'll get the other side," he playfully slapped her butt.

"Wait until I go and check the kids," she sounded as though she had just awakened.

. . .

Mrs. Hansen set the package of frozen pork chops in a pan of water.

. . .

When she could no longer tolerate the labored breathing of the man next to her, Elizabeth prepared to leave. As she reached for her purse, his hand covered hers. She wanted to scream but couldn't. Instead, she jerked her hand violently away then raked her fingernails along his forearm. His grunt followed her as she hurried from the theater.

. . .

Sue Ellen smiled at her children who continued to sleep soundly. The gentle firmness of Joe's hands lingered on the backs of her legs. After closing the door to the children's room she hurried across the hall to the bathroom. She fitted herself with a diaphragm.

Joe helped himself to the pack of cigarettes on top of the bar, finished his drink, and wondered what was taking Sue Ellen so long.

. . .

Mrs. Hansen listened to her children playing in the back yard. She felt uncomfortable in the housedress and decided to change clothes and to freshen up before her husband, Harold, arrived home from work. She set the pot of potatoes on the stove then hurried to the bedroom where she put on a pair of shorts and a clean blouse. Even then, she continued to sweat and knew her Harold would be angry because she smelled. I sweat so much because I work so hard, she thought as she dabbed bath powder between her breasts and sprayed her underarms.

. . .

When Sue Ellen returned to the living room she again wore her robe. Joe, sitting in the reclining chair, tossed the bottle of suntan lotion into the air and caught it.

After returning to the couch, she finished her drink and held the empty glass toward Joe.

"My thighs feel like they're on fire," she said.

. . .

The traffic was heavy as Elizabeth drove across town toward home. Thinking about how little she had accomplished, she felt depressed. The feel of the hand of the strange man in the theater lingered in her mind. She turned right on Eighth Street and continued to Twelfth where she turned left. Two blocks later, she found a parking place near the liquor store.

. . .

Joe's hand trembled as he lifted the bottle of suntan lotion from the coffee table.

"Do it the way you did the backs of my legs," she smiled at him.

He watched the stream of milky lotion slide slowly toward the crevice between her breasts. He began rubbing slowly and firmly, his hands working their way downward. He stopped and played with her breasts. She tilted her head backward and moaned. He kissed her and slid his hands along her smooth stomach to her moist and hairy pubis.

. . .

Mrs. Hansen, standing in front of the bathroom mirror, brushed her teeth until her gums were sore. Her smile quickly turned to a frown when she focused on the blackness of the decay between her front teeth. She blamed the decay on her not having enough milk when she was carrying her last child.

. . .

Sue Ellen savored the coolness of the suntan lotion as its stream spat from her ankles to her thighs. She tried to lie very still and to be very calm as she waited for him to begin rubbing the lotion in, at the same time, she hoped he would start with the bottoms of her feet. She wished she had another drink. A very strong one, anything...

"Please, please, not so hard," she moaned as his hands pressed and kneaded the burned flesh of her upper thighs.

"I have a sunburn. Remember?"

"I'm sorry," he said.

. . .

Mrs. Hansen searched through the refrigerator until she found the makings for a green salad.

. . .

Elizabeth tucked the paper bag containing the bottle of gin under her arm and hurried from the liquor store. She set the bag on the seat beside her. For the first time since leaving the theater, she felt comfortable.

. . .

"God, oh god," Sue Ellen moaned. She reached forward until her hands rested on the waistband of Joe's swim trunks.

He pulled off her panties then buried his head against her naked pubis.

"Yes, yes," she stroked the back of his head.

He stood and quickly peeled off his swim trunks.

"Oh, my god," she said as his legs pressed against hers.

"It hurts too much."

He lowered himself until their abdomens were touching. He pressed harder but was still unable to enter.

"My stomach is on fire," she whined. "Please stop. You have to stop," her voice became loud and angry.

Both stopped and frantically grabbed their clothes when they heard the muted cries of the baby.

"I'm too badly burned," she said as she buttoned her robe.

He didn't answer and walked slowly to the front door.

"If one wakes up, they both do," she said.

He looked at her then at the couch and the bottle of suntan lotion on the coffee table next to the empty drink glass.

He opened the door then turned back.

"You may as well keep the suntan lotion," he said.

She came to his side and gripped his arm.

"There will be other times," she said. The baby's screams became louder. "If one's awake, they're both awake."

. . . .

OVERTIME

Because her room had finished early, Mary was sent to early lunch. When she returned, she was told to relieve in room where they were late getting started on a total abdominal hysterectomy.

"It looks as though this case will be running into the late afternoon," the supervisor said. "And anyway, you're posted to work overtime today."

She looked at the clock in the scrub room. Its second hand swept slowly around as she began her ten minute scrub. Even though she had propped her leg up during her lunch break, it continued to hurt. The ache had been replaced by a burning sensation. She wanted to cry and wished she was home and in bed. She knew Joe would be angry if he had to wait for her. And that he would be especially mad if she didn't get off in time to go grocery shopping. The baby inside her began to kick. She rinsed the lather from her hands and arms. Pushing back her tears, she backed through the double door into the room.

Using the forceps, the circulating nurse handed her a sterile towel to dry with.

"Would you do me a favor?" Mary asked as she dried her hands. "Would you have someone call my husband and tell him not to come after me. That I'll call when I get off."

"Sure," and the circulating nurse hurried from the room.

Mary got a report from the scrub nurse.

The circulating nurse returned and said that they had tried to call but no one answered. She said they would try again later.

Mary slapped the hemostat loudly into the first assistant's hand, at the same time, she reached for another handful of clamps.

"Hey, not so hard," he said. "You want to bruise me?"

"No, sir."

They had gotten into some heavy bleeding and had not yet been able to find the source.

"How's her pressure holding out?" asked the chief resident.

The anesthetist, a young girl who reminded Mary of a mouse, leaned over the top of the drapes.

"Not bad. But I think we had better send for another unit of blood," she said.

The pain in Mary's leg had again turned to a dull ache. She tried shifting her weight from one foot to the other. It didn't help.

They located the source of bleeding and controlled it. While the surgeon began placing lap packs around the uterus, Mary prepared the heavy chromic ties she would need for the larger vessels and the fallopian tubes.

After clamping the uterus with two large Allis clamps, the surgeon lifted it upward and began dissecting around it.

"Here, here," he said to the first assistant. "Feel that. If it isn't cancer, I don't know what the hell is."

The first assistant ran his hand across the top of the uterus.

"Just like golf balls," he said.

Mary, using the edge of the table, pried off her shoes. The cold floor felt very good against her swollen feet.

After fishing ten more bloody sponges from the kick-bucket beside the table, the circulating nurse carried them to the far wall where she weighed them and tied them in a bundle.

. . .

Joe felt better after a cold shower and a nap. He thought of Sue Ellen and everything that had happened and felt sick to his stomach. After drinking a large glass of ice water, he hurried through the house picking up dirty clothes and stuffing them into a pillow case.

. . .

"Finish closing," the resident told the first assistant. "I'm going to the recovery room and write the orders."

Mary quickly threaded the heavy chromic on to the large round needles. She then prepared the lighter plain sutures for the subcutaneous stitches and the silk for the skin.

. . .

Sue Ellen, after Joe left, took another shower and covered herself with what was left of the suntan lotion. She searched through the medicine cabinet until she found the bottle of pain pills she had been given when she had to have her wisdom tooth extracted. She took two of the pills. Her stomach and the front of her legs had already begun to blister.

. . .

"I'm ready for the dressing," the intern extended his hand toward Mary. "And you better have the orderly go for the bed."

She handed up a soaked sponge then began undoing the drapes, tossing the towel clips into the basin with her dirty instruments. Using a hemostat, she removed the blades from the knife handles. She wetted a sponge with ace adherent and set it on the end of her Mayo stand.

. . .

Joe set the pillow cases stuffed with dirty clothes on the front porch. He wondered why Mary had not phoned. She usually did when she was going to be late. Looking at the motorcycle, he realized he would have to make two trips to the laundromat. He decided it could wait until after supper.

. . .

Elizabeth felt much better after a strong drink and a hot bath. She carried her fresh drink into the living room where she sat with her feet propped up listening to the stereo and the street's sounds. The Hansen children, as every

evening, were playing cowboys and Indians.

. . .

Mary pushed her dirty instrument tray into the clean-up room. Mrs. Redding, an old lady with arms like a man's hurried toward her.

"You look peaked dearie," she said. "If you ain't careful you're gonna drop that young-un right here."

"Here," Mary said handing Mrs. Redding a basin. "I put the Ob. Gyn. specials in here. They're going to need them for the first case in the morning."

. . .

When Sue Ellen could no longer tolerate the pain of the sunburn, she phoned Bobby Joe at the station. He said he would find someone to take his place at the lounge. She thanked him and said she would try to cook supper. He told her not to bother.

. . .

Mary's right leg began to feel very hot as she rode the elevator from the sixth floor to the first. An intense pain radiated from her ankle to her thigh to her chest. She gasped and leaned against the side of the elevator. She knew the people she passed on the way to the lobby must be staring at her.

. . .

When Joe phoned the hospital to check on Mary, the supervisor told him that she had already left. He presumed she

had found a ride home. Again he sat on the front porch. He watched the Hansen children run to meet their father. The oldest boy picked up the football and aimed it at his father who went out for a pass. As he watched, Joe prayed silently that Mary would bear him a son.

He smiled then laughed aloud and was quite proud of himself as he sped up the gravel road toward the store where he would buy the steaks, the wine, the flowers and candles and hurry home and try to have it ready by the time Mary arrived or by the time she had taken a bath and had a nap.

. . .

Sitting in the lobby, Mary rested her leg across the couch. She wanted to scream but all of her strength was needed for breathing. She began to feel weaker and light headed. She didn't know why but she wondered if Joe had done the laundry. The baby inside her had been very still for several hours now. She sighed, folded her hands over her abdomen and closed her eyes.

. . .

Joe rushed through the store selecting the items needed for his surprise dinner. He rushed past the baby food counter, backed up, and decided that if he bought one or two jars per trip he would have a healthy supply by the time the baby came. He also bought a pair of blue booties and kept telling himself to think positive. He wanted to do something really silly like buying a football.

. . .

Mary had a very sharp pain in her chest then she felt as though she were in a warm shower. She smiled at the visions unfolding before her. She saw her mother and father floating past. Her first bike. The horse she had read about when she was ten years old and Joe and herself riding the bike along a country road. She saw the baby inside her that looked like the baby pictures of Joe that Joe's mother had shown her. Mary was dead.

. . . .

Joe lighted the candles, put the flowers in water, then began pacing back and forth across the living room waiting for Mary to come home. He again called the hospital. Again the supervisor assured him that she had already left. It was dark. The mercury street lamps flickered then stayed. His excitement turned to anger. The phone rang and he knew it was her. On the way to answering it, he rehearsed what he would say to her about calling when she was going to be late. Before the caller could identify himself Joe said:

"Mary for Christ's sake why..."

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